



The Alchemy of Advertising: Decoding TV ads in Shaping
Postmodern Consumers' Behaviour

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Philosophy
in
Intercultural Studies

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Abstract

TV has, in fact, become a common language in our daily life. Advertisers try hard to create an illusion to position viewers to participate in an interpretive process based on “false assumption” that there is a need to purchase. Therefore, by all means, advertisers aim to place the viewer in relationship to the brand product. They will first create desires that previously not existed and then will try hard to keep the atmosphere “suitably consumptive”. As consumers’ desires are aroused and shaped by the demands of the system of production, not by the need of society or of individuals. In marketing jargon, positioning the viewer is as important as positioning the product as we are categorized into different social classes by the things we purchased. Wearing *Nike*, for instance, constitutes the idea of doing in our own way as inspired by its slogan “Just Do It”. In that sense, advertisements nowadays seem to exceed products’ original use value; focuses are now put on what ideas can be exchanged through the consumption of that particular product. According to Baudrillard, this exchange is a symbolic exchange, which means this consumption has no real life referent but only a chain of social respect, discrimination, success etc..

Advertisement in present days changes the mode of consumption. The emergence of mass production deprived the importance of originality. Thing produced is its own original and share no difference with the rests. Commodities are

now consumed not according to their use value but exchange value. In other words, as commodities are converted to be different signs, a variety of consumptions are thus allowed so as to fulfill different desires. This is exactly what present TV advertisements are doing. As the concept of exchange becomes the central aim of consumption, the "quality" of the commodity will not be considered. The act of purchasing is thus manipulated by advertisers through the magic of signs especially as we experience an excess of information in our age, we are inevitably surrounded by different means of codes especially those we received from the media. In the extreme, TV advertisement can actually "crown the whole edifice of the society" (Baudrillard, 1988: pp. 12). Its authenticity appeals to a new pattern of consumption as opposed to the old way, that is, the "nihilism of consumption" (Baudrillard, 1988: pp. 12) and according to the logic of Baudrillard, death is the only way we can escape. The recipients or the audience becomes what Adorno called "the passive consumers". However, some more suggestive approaches from recent critic like Michel de Certeau who proposed that consumers do retain their own autonomy in consuming cultural products. We can always flip over constantly and critically by re-reading these TV ads to map the cultural reproduction of commodity hegemony. The matter of passivity and activity all depends on how consumers use their productive power in applying these signs especially in the age where they witness an excess of signs.

This thesis probes into the aesthetic power of these signs appeared on TV in term of the making of contemporary consumption ideology. Through analyzing these television images, we are dealing with the question of consumer agency in relation to the power of mass media in contemporary culture.

摘要

在資訊泛濫的年代，廣告是現今最強的語言之一。它推動消費，把商品「神性化」(班雅明)。廣告塑造大眾的品味、鼓吹消費。可是現今的廣告超越了，甚至脫離商品的實用價值。廣告的意象已再不局限於推銷，而反映社會的意識。廣告不再只於推動消費，而透過消費活動，消費者證明自身的價值。正如布希亞(Baudrillard)所言，消費是一種社會活動，消費者藉著消費試圖尋求某種社會意義或個人差異。換句話說，廣告所帶出的，不僅是商品本身，而是具備了交換價值，甚至符號本身也具有一定的價值 (Sign Value)。符號支配著消費大眾，指揮號令，教導大眾如何消費，是典型的資本主義代言人。無怪乎阿多諾 (Adorno) 曾狠狠的批判消費大眾已變得漠視以及被動，聽命於廣告符號的擺佈。甚至布希亞亦不諱言只有死亡才能擺脫符號的纏繞，而在死亡之神來臨前，我們只能保持沉默。可是，但正如法國社會學家笛雪透 de Certeau 所料，大眾在面對廣告符號之時，並非想像中的被動。沉默也可被視為無聲的抗議。在分析廣告符號之時，我們還要研究大眾如何運用符號本身 (de Certeau)。笛雪透所提出的「對策」，包括從日常生活的實行著手，從中作出反抗，甚至顛覆固有的價值以便消費者建立本身的自主性。本文試圖分析香港的廣告符號，希望從中可窺視香港消費者的消費模式，以及他們如何在資訊泛濫中建立的自主性。

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This has been the long awaiting moment in my life. After years of hardship, this project finally comes to an end. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisors – Prof. K. Y Wong and Prof. Thomas Luk – for their support and encouragement; my family and friends who are a caregiver whenever I was in frustration and despair; my classmates in high school and university, who has actually walked me through my hard days. They all have my warm thanks.

Time really flies even though it took me so much time to devote to this scholarship. Writing a thesis is a never-ending story. It is, indeed, an Odysseus's journey to keep you drifting in an endless quest. Yet I know I am not alone. Ada, thanks for your generous time and patient; Hoi, my appreciation always goes to your humour and wisdom; Amy, I am grateful to your help and support; my parents, your love and understanding is the greatest gift God has granted me in my life. My uncle, Gabriel, thanks for not charging me a penny for the proofreading; Yuki, Ellen and Ma Lay, your fine friendship is the thing I treasured. I also need to acknowledge the office staff in the Department, especially Manna, who helps with all the administrative support to my study.

I must admit the previous year is a turning point in my life and I am sure it is, and forever will be, turning for a better future.

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Preface

Advertising is never a simple thing, it has, in fact, become the common language in our daily life. Like myth or magic, advertising is beyond truth and falsehood – it is a self-fulfilling prophecy. In the classical economy of marketing and behavioural study, the function of advertising is to provide the correct and most up-to-date information to the consumer. Furthermore, advertising takes the role of the educator. In view of this, basically, advertising seems to be positive but why do we still have to criticize it? One common criticism is that advertising is the “servant” of Capitalism. It produces endless “false consciousness” to arouse consumers’ desire to consume. Criticisms against advertisement focuses turn to the “charismatic” nature of advertising as obviously there must be some “elements” inside that subtly push the very act of consumption and this maybe the reason why Raymond Williams calls it “the magic system”. (Williams 1962, p. 186)

Advertisers try hard to create an illusion for positioning viewers to participate in an interpretative process based on a “false assumption” that there is a need for them to purchase. The successful advertiser has now become the master of a new art: the art of making things true by declaring they are so. Advertisers aim at sublimating their commodities to a “ritual” level where commodities are worshipped by their “disciples”. With the help of the media, a vivid yet unique image of the product is

thus established. It is this uniqueness of authenticity which Baudrillard calls “sign” that is consumed by the consumers. To be more precise, it is these social signifiers that are conveyed through TV advertisements that are made ready for the consumers to consume. Commodities, as social signifiers, carry the symbolic mission to exchange for identity, meaning and pleasure.

Advertisement in present days has changed its mode of consumption. The emergence of mass production has deprived commodity of the importance of originality. Things produced are their own original and share no difference with the rests. Commodities count not because of their use value but exchange value. Focuses are now put on what meaning can be derived through the act of consumption. Therefore, by every means, advertisers aim to place the viewers in relation to the brand product. In marketing jargon, positioning the viewer is as important as positioning the product as we are categorized into different social classes by the things we purchase. Wearing *Nike*, for instance, constitutes the idea of doing things in our own way as inspired by its “Just do it” slogan. Products of similar kinds are thus differentiated not by their quality but by their means of packaging instead. In other words, as commodities are converted into different signs, a variety of consumption is thus allowed so as to fulfil different desires – one does not buy an object but a chain of social values such as respect, discrimination, health, success etc.

This is exactly what present TV advertisements are doing. As the concept of “exchange” becomes the central aim of consumption, the “quality” of the commodity will not be considered. The act of purchasing is thus manipulated by advertisers through the magic of signs. The targets of advertisement thus have become what Adorno calls “the passive consumers” (Adorno 2001, p. 1-29). Since consumers consume for the sake of pleasure, consumption becomes an escape for all real time sufferings, or, at least for a very short period of time. The success of TV advertisement lies in the fact that even though consumers understand the trick, they are still willing to accept it and feel the need to purchase. My interest is to study what sort of consumption pattern can be derived in a world where TV advertising images dominate. Moving from Adorno to de Certeau, a change in consumer’s role from passivity to active involvement indicates consumers do retain their own autonomy in consuming cultural products. It all depends on how consumers use their productive power in applying these signs especially in an age where consumers witness an over-abundance of signs.

The advancement in technology creates a gap between social practices and the mode of production. From the lack of information to the excess of information, the general public have experienced the impotence of being surrounded by a variety of signs. As the relationship between signifiers and signified is entirely arbitrary, signs

can always be interpreted in various ways with the aim to generate a fantasy world through TV images in order to provide satisfaction for consumers. It is through semiology that interpretations can be neutralized, just like the process of deciphering myth according to Barthes.

As we experience an excess of information in our age, we are inevitably surrounded by different means of codes, especially those we receive from the media. In the extreme, TV advertisement can actually “crown the whole edifice of the society” (Baudrillard 1996, p. 12). Its authenticity appeals to a new pattern of consumption as opposed to the old way, that is the “nihilism of consumption” (Ibid) and according to the logic of Baudrillard, death is the only way to escape. However, before the moment of our death, we can change our passivity by deconstructing the commodity logic. We can flip over constantly and critically by re-reading those TV ads to map the cultural reproduction of commodity hegemony. My interest is to probe into the aesthetic power of these signs appearing on TV in terms of the making of contemporary consumption ideology. Through analyzing these television images, we are dealing with the question of agency in relation to the power of mass media in contemporary culture.

The success of advertising industry is a result of the development of electronic media. My focus will be mainly on TV broadcasting. The invention of TV pays

much tribute to the development of modern science and technology, which are actually founded on the fundamental aspects of alchemy. The term “alchemy” is chosen instead of “magic” because the latter has been abused in whatever discussions associated with TV ads. *Magic* refers to those inexplicable phenomena, it is a concept used to describe a mode of rationality or way of thinking that looks to invisible forces to influence events, or present the illusion of change. Whereas *alchemy*, on the other hand, is the “power or process to transform something common into something special” as suggested by the *Britannica*¹. Alchemy suggests an attempt to transform from or even go beyond the existing situations, so it is more appropriate to my topic as it conveys a closer relationship with technology. Advertisers are like alchemists, who recite a spell and “turn objects into a “pseudo-event which will become the real event of daily life”(Baudrillard 1996; pp. 144) through TV broadcasting. The aim of advertisements is to produce consumers. Objects are sublimated to a ritualistic level through the over abundance of signs on TV ads, and are made ready for those potential consumers who are like worshipping disciples. The trick often used is the play and display of signs and spectacles on the screen. Only by deciphering the signs can we unmask the trick.

Indeed, it is the story *Dr. Faustus* that inspires me to use the word *alchemy*.

¹ *Britannica On-line*, <http://search.eb.com>

Faustus, who practises alchemy and sells his own soul to *Lucifer* in return for wealth and power, ends up in tragedy. Through practising alchemy, he is able to conjure up devils and fulfill his desire to see the most beautiful woman in the world – Helen of Troy. It is due to his ambition (which is often regarded as his tragic flaw) that Faustus is able to achieve what common man cannot achieve. Similar to the achievement of those so-called “mad scientists” in science-fiction or cyberpunk movies, such an ambition founds the success in science and technology. What can be imagined can actually be achieved sooner or later. The story *Dr. Faustus* can be paraphrased using a modern scientific approach: the reason why Faustus can communicate with Lucifer or even Helen of Troy is that throughout his experiment in alchemy practice, he actually invents a screen through which Dr. Faustus is able to get in touch with people who are not supposed to be alive at his time. Modern technology can, in fact, eliminate the limitation of space and time, which pave the way for Baudrillardian simulation.

Reasons for using TV as the primary medium

TV, as the platform for advertising, is the remarkable mass medium in our age. The phrase “mass media” denotes two things: one is *mass*, meaning the large number of people involved; the second one is *media*, which is commonly used as a plural form

of *medium*, meaning “the agencies of mass communication” (*Britannica Online*)².

In a society where people are experiencing an explosion of information through the various agencies, TV fulfills the above criteria and remains the most powerful and influential agency, as it has become a must in most people’s life, especially in an urban environment.

Living in an age of information, we are constantly exposed to television. Television plays an important role in shaping our everyday culture as well as constructing meanings in society, which in return, helps to integrate our attitudes and beliefs. Television in this sense, is a shaper of social attitude as it is frequently used to promote products and stimulate the act of purchasing. Besides, television is also the most potent and influential machine in changing habits and modes of life, affecting our ways of living. In short, television is an effective and preferable means to study consumer behaviour.

TV advertisement is a highly condensed form of information, which tends to be selectively responsive to aspects of cultural studies. It provides audience with both visual and audio images which the majority of people find more animated and appealing than those provided by other media such as radio and newspaper. In fact, as McLuhan has pointed out, “print technology created the public [whereas] electronic

² Britannica Online, <http://search.eb.com/cgi-bin/dictionary>

technology created the mass” (McLuhan 1967; p. 69). Today, with the effect of worldwide TV broadcasting, messages are everywhere, existing in an excessive amount. People cannot resist grasping them. In short, this is what Baudrillard called “the implosion of meaning” which eventually makes the mass “silent” (Baudrillard 1983). However, a much more suggestive approach was adopted by the French sociologist Michel de Certeau. He proposed that we should start from our everyday practices to “re-invent” our own status, to reclaim our own sovereignty in the battle against all cultural norms (de Certeau 1984).

Methodology

The whole thesis consists of 3 main chapters.

An overview of our present world in Baudrillardian sense is presented in the very first chapter based on his key idea of simulation and its consequences. Starting from his first book *System of Object*, Baudrillard has developed a theory to analyse the power of electronic media. Focuses will be put on how the power of images presented on TV squeezes all the energy of their real life referent and eventually engulf them and take over their position based on the formula “more X than X” as Baudrillard stated in *America*

“Everything is destined to reappear as simulation. Landscape as photography, women as the sexual scenario, thoughts as writing, terrorism as fashion and the media, events

as television. Things seem only to exist by virtue of this strange destiny. You wonder whether the world itself isn't just here to serve as advertising copy in some other world."

(Baudrillard 1988; p. 32)

An example of how terrorism is delineated to be a pure televisual event will be illustrated in 1.1 based on the September 11th incidence. Not only does simulation erase all our real life experience, but also only on the basis of simulation are the power of "emptiness" and "meaning in its zero degree" (Baudrillard 1988, p. 39) are brought out, hence, deriving the concept of "floating signifier" which paves the way for the emergence of "desert screen" (Baudrillard 1988, p. 1-12)

The focus of chapter 2 will be the nature of sign. Commodities now being perceived as pure images and signs in the advertising industry, the whole chapter will be devoted to the study of them. From Saussure's ideas on signifier and signified (2.1) to Roland Barthes's connotation and denotation (2.2) and then to Baudrillard's analysis on Symbolic Value (2.3), the value of signs has now been evacuated especially with the popularity of screen and network. Speed makes all meanings disappear at the moment when they appear. It brainwashes away everything, removes all traces immediately after signs have made their debut on screen. In short, speed creates pure objects and makes both the screen and the city (America, or Hong Kong maybe) a desert (2.4 & 2.5). Three case studies will be examined in illustrating the features of postmodern Hong Kong TV advertisement, they are *Sunday*,

Vitasoy and *KMB* respectively. The reason for choosing them as my case studies is that they aroused many noises in the society soon after they had been released. Besides, unlike other traditionally advertisements, their “product” are advertised in quite a subtle way which seems, on the surface, violate the principle of advertising, but in fact, it is a “strategy” used to “regain” the control of “tactical space” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 479-481) developed by consumers after their long viewing history (both “strategy” and “tactic” are terms used by de Certeau on the idea of consumer agency which will be discussed in chapter 3). Finally, I will pinpoint how, through the act of consumption, consumers can retrieve their sense of history and memory in such a desert like Hong Kong, perhaps (2.6) and then what sort of the some postmodern consumption pattern can thus be derived (2.6.1).

Chapter 3 will be on the idea of consumer agency. The importance of agency remains an important question in the study of consumerism as in de Certeau’s writings. It is all about the question of consumer autonomy. Consumers are traditionally believed to be the losers in the battle against commodity as they are unable to make their own decision when facing different kinds of commodities. – they do not actually know which they should buy. What annoys consumers most is not the decision to buy or not, but which one should be the one they choose. In view of this, different means of “educational method” have thus arisen; advertisements; therefore, has taken

up the role of “instructing” consumers how and what to buy. However, the growing importance of advertisement gradually swaps the positions of “the need to consume” and “the desire to consume”. If we look into the reason why consumers are moved unconsciously to consume, the sales method (that is, advertising strategy) is always the main target of criticism. Emphasis will be on how consumers can think of ways to make use of the existing signs and their present status to turn against the existing system of representations (that is, the penetration of signs in all aspects of our life).

Research limitation

The main limitation lies in the fact that it cannot provide a full coverage to all TV advertisements in Hong Kong. In fact, my thesis is not a mere study of the different types of TV advertisement in Hong Kong, but how the consumers make use of the those TV signs to subvert against the existing system of representation. Thus the more the signs confuse the recipients, the more they are suitable for analysis. This is the reason why I have selected the Sunday series, the KMB series and Vitasoy series as they arouse so much noise in the society once the ads have been released. And I am sure there are of courses cases that will be overlooked, but it is just my intention to initiate the discussion, to make an attempt arouse reader’s awareness to the study of TV signs.

Chapter 1 Simulation Rules!

With the advent of electronic media, we have gradually moved into the “Second media age”¹ where democracy of information can be achieved. However, is it as democratic as the technological optimist Marshall McLuhan thought when he proposed his idea on “global Village”? Or, as the Marxists pessimistically think it is a one-way, one-dimensional communication, subject to the law of capitalism and thus can only result in the production of a “passive consumer”?

Today, from the individual to the society as a whole, everything concerns information. Screens are all around, in fact, screens, television and computer monitor exert a major influence on us. The promiscuity of network, in theory, enables us to become anyone or to be anywhere we want to be. Promiscuity in a sense it is all accessible through terminals. Simply switch on the “On” button on your remote control or turn on your computer, you will automatically be connected to the rest of the world. How easy! Yet something is changing in the light of technological advancement: imagine a world where communication is reduced to bytes and pixels (so that it will be ready to be transmitted through TV and computer

¹ ¹ According to Mark Poster, the First Media Age is dominated by the broadcast model of few producers and many consumers of messages. He even compared the First Media Age to the interpretation of Fascism given by Adorno and Horkimer in the sense that both lead to the creation of passive consumer and the rise of hegemony. Whereas the Second Media Age concerns with the question of agency. “A system of multiple producers / distributors / consumers, an entirely new configuration of communication relations in which the boundaries between these terms collapsed” with the advancement in technology. So, from now on, even the consumer can produce meanings for their own, hence, no one is in control of the cultural production of the media. For details, please refer to Poster. *Second Media Age*, p. 3

network), social relations to codes (symbolic exchange), human beings to genetic order or DNA and their identity is only a number, and where the media mediate all these. What significance will this have for us then?

Screens and network produce endless reduplication of signs and signs produced from these media are sliding into our brain and become the simulated hyperreal product. The over-abundance of signs is the cause of what Baudrillard calls simulation. Everywhere around us is reality being (re)produced as simulation – fashion, news, advertising. The circulation of the “reality” through television and other screenal forms gradually erases any sense of “realisticity” beneath the image. There is increasingly little difference between reality and the one depicted on TV, as in those “Reality Shows” or infotainment, and TV advertisements which turn private space into public domain, or later, into terminal networks. Take the case of condom or female sanitary napkin, they were once regarded as private matters and would not be advertised on TV, but now we always see ads of these kinds on TV. This is an example of how private issues are brought onto the public domain through the television screen.

In fact, reality is now delineated as something that can be reproduced or simulated through these technological forms. To simulate reality is not to feign nor

to be fictional but to produce all symptoms of the real. Poster paraphrases Baudrillard's example of illness by saying that

"Someone who feigns an illness can simply go to bed and pretend he is ill. Someone who simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms...since the simulator produces "true" symptoms, is he or she ill or not? The simulators cannot be treated objectively either as ill, or as not ill...For if any symptom can be "produced" and can no longer be accepted as a fact of nature, then every illness may be considered as simulatable and simulated, and medicine loses its meaning since it only knows how to treat "true" illnesses by their object causes."

(Poster 1988, p. 168)

This is precisely the description of the postmodern logic: reality (illness) is simulated as screens and network (simulator) as they produce exactly the same symptoms. Our daily living experiences appear on screen, which makes us cast doubt on their occurrences. With our present system of signification (medicine), it is not able to differentiate the difference; thus there emerges a new method of decoding signs. Here I do not use the term "system" because according to Baudrillard, there will not be anymore systems as everything is already imploded in the third order simulation.

Consider those "Reality TV show" like *Denpa, HK version* (電波少年): the non-stop filming of two young adventurers *chao-ren* (昭仁) and *itou* (伊藤) who were asked to travel from Africa to Eastern Europe. They were given only limited resources and so they had to try all means to make a living throughout the entire journey without seeking any assistance from the filming crew. The crew's duty was

to record their bits and pieces of experiences and transmit them back home. The show was particularly interesting as the audience thought they were watching a real live experience. Their “real” experience was depicted as a merely cinematic image, for any “real” events that appear on TV must conform with entertainment values. Things were not as smooth as they wanted them to be because the monotony of life had “removed” every bit of excitement from our daily life. Excitement had now become a screenal form, ready for the audience’s consumption. A theme song was composed for this occasion. The audience was invited to share all the ups and downs of the two protagonists. Details of their living were presented, including insignificant daily experiences like sleeping or toileting, all of which became serious issues. This sort of “real experience” is encoded with all entertaining elements to make it “true” and “realistic”. The techniques of TV presentation used by the filming crew were not accounted in order to fool the audience, making them convinced what they were watching were real – all real events taking place somewhere out there. Thus, it seems that there is no longer any distinction between “real life” and television, especially when the real life has increasingly become the subject of TV broadcast like the *Truman Show*, the Gulf War or the recent bombing scene of the World Trade Centre in Manhattan. One might still question if TV still serves as a mere a representation of real life.

We once lived in the realm of imaginary where meanings are produced through the operation of a truth/false dialectic system. The site of Otherness (or the mirror image) is the reference where our identity, our existence, our selves and are derived. But now it is the realm of a screen, of simulation and of TV and computer networks that replace the previous systems of representation. A screen is different from a mirror in the sense that it induces only a "surface of communication". Unlike a mirror in which one can see his or her own double on the other side, a screen has no sides, but only another surface; in other words, the screen is all absorbing. It has no relevance to time and space. It only communicates images – beyond the screen lies another surface, which means that you no longer have the depth of scene to make signs meaningful. No doubt Baudrillard uses the metaphor of a Black hole to describe this phenomenon. In the end, the screen just makes everything circulate in one space, without depth, where all the objects are able to follow one another, without slowing down or stopping the circuit. In short, there is nothing beyond-the-screen, not even the scene itself as a scene can exist only through the operation of distance. Such a distance allows you to see a more vivid picture, but now the scene is taken over by the screen and yet distance is shrinking to such an extent that you almost feel you are inside the screen as well – the person appearing on the screen could be you!

Simulation threatens the difference between "true" and "false"; "real" and

“imaginary”. Nothing on the screen is meant to be deciphered; rather, it is meant for instantaneous reception, “in an abreaction immediate to meaning, a short-circuiting of the poles of representation” (Baudrillard 1998; p. 14). From representational tool to simulated tool, TV has eventually abandoned its function as a mirror to reflect and represent the reality. Now it is used to constitute a new media reality, which is more real than the real where the “real” is “subordinated to representations and simulations thus leading ultimately to dissolving of the “real” (Kellner 1989; p. 68) as Poster points out in his analysis of Baudrillard’s theories,

“Events themselves disappear behind the television screen or the more general screen of information (for it is true that events have no probable except in this deflective screen, which is no longer a mirror). While the mirror and screen of alienation was a mode of production (the imaginary subject), this new screen is simply its mode of disappearance.”

(Poster 1988; p. 213)

TV creates an illusion that something has really taken place but in fact, this happening is only in a simulational sense.

Simulation eventually eliminates all dual aspects, thus there will no longer be any systems, or the systems suggested by Baudrillard are just some non-dialectical, non-dualistic ones. The distinction between object and representation, thing and idea is no longer valid. Simulation is “different from a fiction or lie in that it not only represents an absence as a presence, the imaginary as the real, but it also undermines any contrast to the real, absorbing the real within itself” (Poster 1988; p.

6). Like the real with the unreal, beautiful with the ugly or even the subject with the object, it is not that the ugly or the unreal takes over its former, but it is that the latter has absorbed the energy of the former, by “intensifying the former in the appearances of the contrary, by submerging themselves to the point of ecstasy” (Poster 1988; p. 186) to make it more real than the real (hyperreal), more beautiful than the beautiful (fashion). By intensifying its own superlative status has it passed beyond its own limit, which means that it has surpassed its original definition.

Every characteristic thus elevated to the superlative power, caught in an intensifying spiral – more true than true, more beautiful than beautiful, more real than the real – is assured a vertiginous effect that is independent of all content or specific quality, and which presently has the tendency of being our only passion. The passion of intensification, of escalation, of mounting power, of ecstasy, of whatever quality so long as, having ceased to be relative to its opposite (the true to the false; the beautiful to the ugly; the real to the imaginary), it becomes superlative, positively sublimates as if it has absorbed the energy of its opposite.

(Poster 1988; p. 186)

According to this logic, when the meaningless has absorbed all the energy of the meaningful, we have advertising. When monotony has absorbed all the energy of entertainment, we have this kind of “Reality TV” drama series like *The Tang Inheritance Crisis* (鄧家爭產事件). Intensification is the salvation as the world is not moving toward an equilibrium, but towards extremes where “[evil] expresses itself in the evil genius of the objects, it express[es] itself in the ecstatic form of the pure object, in its victorious strategy over that of the subject” (Baudrillard 1990; p. 9). The subject never understands the object, but it just dominates by its given superiority

in the previous means of dialectic operation. But with simulation, subjects no longer enjoy their privileges; they shift to become the object, the hyperreal object, the simulated object instead. In a hyperreal world where the system of signification is no longer valid, Baudrillard tries to find a way out from a different angle – that is, on the side of the object instead. As Kellner puts it, “the subject, then, becomes transformed into an object as part of a nexus of information and communication network” (Kellner 1994; p. 72). Baudrillard used the logic of the object which he called “fatal strategy” to understand the world, to understand the trick of simulation. Fatal strategy proclaims the supremacy of the object in the Subject/object relation. Object, which is not entirely subject, is always “becoming subject”. Object, in a sense is different from subject as it has “no imaginary, it is without imaginary but that is precisely its power, it is free from the system of production, identification, mirror, desire etc.” (Gane 1993; p. 52). In short, it has a lesser burden of duty to uphold its supremacy when compared to the Subject and is free to move around, looking for chances to fight back. The object understands the subject well enough (in fact, the object even contains all the elements of the subject) that it knows every strategy the subject uses to produce meaning, to maintain its superior status. All the objects do is to announce its (subject/object) indifference as they are all imploded in simulation, in other words, their reversibility. The TV screen or computer monitor is the new locus

of Objects. By expanding (that is, the intensification as discussed before) objects themselves to their ecstatic form (that is, the superlative), surpassing their own limit, they will eventually take over (that is, reach the state of obscenity, full exposure). It is no longer the difference between each other but a differentiating of the same. This maybe the reason why Baudrillard calls advertising a “self-fulfilling prophecy” because meanings of signs are being extracted in order to surpass the subject/object relation. There cannot be any answer to the meaning of the ad lies outside the ad itself, hence self-fulfilling. With simulation, objects no longer mirror the subject’s desire but they are indifferent. Now, what the subject can do is to seduce, to play with the superficial with the hope to go back to its previous superior status in a dialectic subject/object relation.

[Objects] found a way to elude the dialectic of meaning a dialectic which bored them: they did this by infinite proliferation, by potentializing themselves, by outmatching their essence, by going to extremes, and by obscenity which henceforth has become their immanent purpose and insane justification... We are not opposing the visible to the hidden, we will seek what is more hidden than the hidden: the secret. What is more mobile than the mobile: metamorphosis, ; what is more false than the false: illusion and appearance.

(Poster 1988; p. 185)

Meaning was once derived from what it could be exchanged for. But now simulation makes all things indifferent. The means to make things meaningful towards meaning (seduction) disappears when signs are realized in excess meaning. This is so because the trick of seduction laying on the giddiness, since everything in

the surface only succeeds to signal difference instead of the differences of things in depth. Take the case of a woman seducing a man by asking him which part of her is the most attractive, the man replied it is her eye and the next day, he received her pair of naked eyes. Baudrillard uses this to illustrate the fact that sign (that is, the eyes) escapes from seduction of the subject by blowing its own value indefinitely. In case of TV ads, they play with the tricking of seduction by producing non-stop and endless transmission of signs so that we may become vertiginous. The aim of giddiness is to create the illusion that the subject, the reality, is still prevalent. However, this maybe another trick of the object as it is believed to be "clearer, more cynical, more ingenious than the subject, and awaits at every turn." (Poster 1988; p. 198) The feeling that the subject can return to its independent or meaning productive status through seduction is just an illusion. It is another trap set by the object for its prey. We are all asked to take superficiality as meaning just like the Guinness ads slogan: Believe. Believe in what? Simply the signs themselves. In fact, the subject has always been seduced by the object, to make believe that it is the subject who is in control. With experience from the media, the subject is, by all means overpowered by the object: the production of more real than real; more sexual than sex; more visible than the visible, and the subject eventually disappears at the sight of obscenity.

The fact that information is already in excess through the transmission of the

screen and network, makes things too visible, even more visible than the visible so that it will not make any difference. Thus there is nothing to see, not because there is nothing there; on the contrary, it is because there are already too many things to be seen. According to Baudrillard, this is what the postmodern world is like: unstable, fragmented and disoriented. Unstable because we no longer rely on the binary system of representation to produce meaning; the logic of dialectic difference cannot regulate systems in the third order simulation (in fact, there will not be any systems after all); fragmented because things are simulated and our sense of “real time” experience is lost and what we encounter is the end of history (which will be discussed later); disoriented because the world is full of different kinds of information but very little of them are informative. The process of simulation goes on endlessly through the popularity of the screen that eventually erases real communication (again, this will be discussed later). With so much information delivered instantaneously and endlessly, it creates a situation, which Baudrillard calls the “ecstasy of communication”.

According to Baudrillard, the advance of information technology will eventually challenge the Real, thus puts an end to everything, even history itself. For him, the shift from reality to hyperreality occurs when representation is replaced by simulation. We are now living in the hyperreality, in a world where simulation is the dominant

form of cultural life. As all Baudrillard's ideas are interconnected and rich for discussion (especially concerning features in postmodern era in the light of technological advancement), be it "simulation", "object", "hyperreality", "seduction", "transparency", "implosion" and "ecstasy". It is difficult to take a string out of a thread, I try to start with "simulation" as it is the source for bringing the world into its present status.

1.1 Simulation: The Collapse of Original and Copy

Very often people will speak of simulation as illusion, as something faked. But for Baudrillard, it refers to something different: the aim of simulation is "not to do away with reality, but on the contrary to realize it, to make it real" (Butler 1999; p. 23). To treat it as an illusion is not appropriate as it is a way of "fundamentally getting rid of the illusionality of the world" (Ibid.) like Borges' map: too detailed that it is not the map that resemble the territory but just the opposite – the territory is disappearing and turned to be a "desert of the real" (Baudrillard 1981; p. 2). But bear in mind that what matters is not the loss of territory, but the contact between the original and copy in a third order simulation.

According to Baudrillard, there are three orders of simulation². The first order

² In *Simulation and Simulacra*, Baudrillard listed the 4 successive stage of the image:

1. It is the reflection of a basic reality
2. It masks and perverts a basic reality

is merely a representation of the external object which he calls a counterfeit, as in the Renaissance period. This period is characterised by its imitation of reality, like the painting of Leonardo da Vinci. Copy of the object is produced and their relationship is singular, as the level of production still proceeds essentially by hand and on a small scale. Later, industrial production of objects transforms counterfeit into production. Objects are reproduced on a massive scale, thus eliminating their "aura", a term used by Benjamin in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (Benjamin 1985, p. 217-252). In the realm of the second order of simulation, difference between the original and its copy is still noticeable, even though the degree of "likeness" has been increased as a result of the improvement in technique. In the third order of simulation, the electronic era, the real is "liquidated" as there is no longer theatrical illusion. In the first order, a copy is made of the real, the representation is in some sense, unique; in the second order, with mass production of objects, there comes the possibility that the uniqueness, or the aura will be destroyed. Yet it still preserved some distinction between the original and the copy. Think of the difference between a human and the very prototype of a robot. Even though the latter is modeled on the former, there is still a difference maintained between them in the second order. Whereas in the third order, the relation between

3. It masks the absence of a basic reality

4. It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum

What I am concerned is the last one as this is where the discussion of TV ads should be grounded.

original and copy breaks down entirely because of the ability to produce or reproduce. There is no longer copy nor original, even a live concert can be reproduced digitally by means of computer software (of which the majority of people cannot tell the difference). Therefore, no more first copy; the sound or the drumbeat can be changed without any seams and differences. This is precisely the logic of advertising images (my target of study): no copy, no origin and thus no imitation of the real – they are self-referential. It is all a self-fulfilling prophecy. Later, Baudrillard includes the fourth order in *The Transparency of Evil* (Baudrillard 1993), namely, proliferation – based on viral or fractal order of value, developed from the third order but in fact, with no great difference in operation. As he does not deal with this order in great detail by giving it proper definitions and operations, I will simply focus on the first three instead.

Simulation does not conceal but produces reality through technology, from mass media to biotechnology. Therefore in the third order of simulation, there is no longer any binary opposition; everything is reduced into codes, (from language to our existence as it is derived from genetic DNA, again, codes) and ready to be transmitted through the network in high velocity. It must be codes and not others because only codes could be produced digitally by mathematical formulae (like computer code). If the existence of human were not reduced to DNA, surely cloning would not be

made effective. The advent of technology even upsets the cause and effect relation: imagine a music record produced digitally from inside a studio, including all the elements of a live performance, for instance, cheers from the audience, the simulated music makes live music disappear into its perfect performing quality as most people cannot be able to tell the difference. According to Baudrillard, it is the case where the effect (that is, the reproduction of the music) casts doubt on the existence of the cause, (that is, the live performance). The linear sequence of causes and effects is being upset here. However, as our technology is not advance enough to send us back to the past, the question of “real time”, “true existence” remains dubious. Thus what Baudrillard proposes is a non-linear approach to the study of simulation especially when dealing with the third order because its logic lies outside that of a linear history. The same cause does not produce the same effect, but as there are so many strange attractors and variables inside, the result will be unpredictable. The stability of the relationships between causes and effects and between subjects and objects is further intensified by the speed when Baudrillard writes.

“The speed of light protects the reality of things by guaranteeing that the images we have of them are contemporaneous. This is the extent to which this speed is our referent, our God, and for us represents the absolute. If the speed of light becomes relative, then no more transcendence.”

(Poster 1998; p. 194)

It is difficult to employ any absolute measure as information is circulated in the speed of light which can never be slowed down especially with the help of electronic media.

Hence, the boundary between subject/object dichotomies becomes blurred and eventually no longer exists. The Speed corresponds to the variable and

“varies according to different bodies, scarcely diffusing beyond the immediate environment, a field of optical messages fading at a distance. The images of bodies would scarcely propagate beyond a luminous territory, outside of which they would no longer exist.”

(Poster 1988; p. 194.)

Events today are too real and too immediate (like the September 11th incidence), and there is not enough time for its courses to develop outside the media, that is they are always heading for an implosion. History is reduced to merely news and the event is measured by neither its courses nor consequences but creates its own stage and its own dramatic effect. However, as the masses always have an obsession with reality (even though it is only a simulation), they think that the “true event” must have taken place somewhere sometime before, and they are anticipating the ending in order to release them from the linear flow of time (that is, from beginning to end). Take the previous example of *Denpa* (電波少年), audience were obsessed with the development of the show. In fact, they did not treat it as show but real live experience instead because they thought things presented in the programme were real as the events did take place somewhere sometimes before. However, as modern technology can even produce memory by surgical implanting into the human brain (as memory can be seen as a kind of information), history or historical events can even be produced or reproduced, according to Baudrillard, this will be the end of history, or

more precisely, the end of history is itself an illusion. Reality is “murdered” symbolically, however, it is not dead, but it has just disappeared behind the screen, hence extermination of reality. It is a “perfect crime” as it takes place without a trace, not even the corpse is left behind. It is precisely modern technology, especially the short circuit and instantaneity of all things in global information through TV and computer network that contribute to the disappearance of reality.

“For reality is but a concept, or a principle, and by reality I mean the whole system of values connected with this principle. The Real as such implies an origin, an end, a past and a future, a chain of causes and effects, a continuity and a rationality. No real without these elements, without an objective configuration of discourse. And its disappearing is the dislocation of this whole constellation.”

(Baudrillard 2000; p. 63)

Reality is vanishing, not because there is the lack of it, but because there are so many realities that make it disappear through proliferation, just like excessive information eventually puts itself to an end. What Baudrillard is talking here is that the system of representation will no longer be valid in the third order simulation. All signs are self-referential, but seen from the outside there is nothing. He refers this phenomenon to that of politics. Take the case of an opinion poll. Opinion polls are a mark for running a democratic election since they survey the views of the people. However, it is hard to measure whether people are really influenced by these opinion polls. The truth is behind us (if there is truth). What we can see is just a simulated democracy, a simulation of people’s opinions. We are living in an illusion where

things are exactly what they seem to be. And this is the point where Baudrillard's ideas break up with McLuhan. McLuhan's famous dictum – "the medium is the message" – cannot find its way out for it can only be operated in the second order simulation where the medium and the message is still distinguishable. In the third order, there will not be anymore medium because the media are like a black hole of signs and information that absorbs all contents into cybernetic noise which no longer communicates meaningful messages in a process in which all contents imploded into form" (Kellner 1989, p. 68). It is in this case that there is no distinction between news and TV advertisements, for both of them indicate all-absorbing power of the media.

"The medium is the message signifies not only the end of the message, but also the end of the medium. There are no longer media in the literal sense of the term (I am talking above all about the electronic mass media) – that is to say, a power mediating between one reality and another, between one state of the real and another – neither in content nor in form. Strictly speaking that is what implosion signifies: the absorption of one pole into another, the short-circuit between poles of every differential system of meaning, the effacement of terms and of distinct oppositions and thus that of the medium and the real... This critical – but original – situation must be thought through to the very end; it is the only one we are left with. It is useless to dream of a revolution through content or through form, since the medium and the real are now in a single nebulous state whose truth is unpredictable.

(Baudrillard 1983; pp. 102-3)

There is no longer distinction between the medium and the message, all contents and forms now being internalized. "The medium is the message" is no longer valid anymore. The golden time of McLuhan is gone as "the message of the media is

devoured by the masses” (Horrocks 1999; pp.141). Real communication vanished as there are no more senders and receivers. Or, in other words, no more space and time for senders and receivers to signify their difference. Now comes the age where everyone is his own subject of communication. Especially with the help of a screen – his own terminal, hence, there is no more medium and no more message; TV turns out to be a mere connection between different terminals³ (Baudrillard). Think of the TV ads, SK II series: no communication occurs there (even though it fabricates one with the presence of a phantom interviewer). What is there is a simulated sender of the message (Sammi Cheung) and terminals (us). And in case of an opinion poll, it does not serve to signify anything but it is a reproduced simulacrum of public opinions. Thus, it is just evidence that there are public opinions. For Baudrillard, all these are simulated reality. Opinions polls and all those political things (including advertising and propaganda) are artifices and tricks which exist on the shimmering surface of the screen and make people believe in true democracy and communication.

If reality is murdered by simulation, then, by all means, the screen will be its accomplice and speed will be the weapon used⁴. Speed gives us a sense of immediation as in those Broadband TV ads: On-line ecstasy (極速上網).

³ Original quotation from *Baudrillard For Beginners*, pp. 129 “Each person is his or her own terminal. TV is not communication, only connection”

Immediation implies both immediate and mediated. What we perceive are in a sense, mediated by codes. Besides, speed helps to create a sense of fiction as it “creates pure objects ...[and] is itself a pure object, since it cancels out the ground and territorial references-point, since it runs ahead of time to annul time itself” (Baudrillard 1988; p. 6). There is a kind of escalation, which terminates at a point of inertia where the speed is so great – speed refers to the rotation of message in high velocity – that one can no longer produce enough energy to mobilize the system. It is a kind of implosion. The mass is moving less and less and eventually becomes inert, towards the state of silence. Speed is the escalation of movement, and in ecstasy, there is no longer any stage, no more scene, no more passion either – all are intense. Thus the circulations of information in a high velocity (that is, in an ecstatic state) like TV could result in the happening of what could not happen. TV is a virtual world where all potentialities are embraced.

With the help of speed, information is therefore transmitted both instantaneously and second-hand (for there is no such thing as first-hand, information received by us will pass on to our internal screen, deciphered by our brain and thus produce the message, which is also a simulation). Simulation “protects the reality of all things by guaranteeing that the images we have are contemporaneous. According to Baudrillard, this is the greater extent for speed and for us to represent the absolute.

However, electronic media nowadays help to circulate information everywhere at the speed of light, there is no longer any absolute measure. Instead, the speed of light, “like the wind, would be variable...light would vary according to different bodies, scarcely diffusing beyond the immediate environment, a field of optical messages fading at a distance.” (Baudrillard 1988; p. 14) Again, meaning would be destroyed by implosion.

“For some time now, in the dialectical relationship between reality and images (that is, the relation that we wish to believe dialectical, readable for the real to the image and vice versa), the image has taken over and imposed its own immanent ephemeral logic, an immoral logic without depth, beyond good and evil, beyond true and falsity; a logic without extermination if its own referent, a logic of the implosion of meaning in which the message disappear on the horizon of the medium.”

(Baudrillard 1993; p. 23)

Implosion⁵ produces “meaninglessness” of signs, it is

“the opposite of the controlled explosive nature of modern society...The trouble is that it’s gone too far and reached fatal speed. Implosion spells the end of every representation and its violent intake as non-meaning.”

(Horrocks 1999; p140-1)

Signs are so profuse that any excess of them would automatically be meaningless. As discussed earlier, the image of “black hole” is used to illustrate the operation of electronic media. The fact that matter, even light itself, cannot escape the absorption of black hole is used to show how media eliminates all sorts of effective communication of signs. As space and scene are eliminated, any effective exchange of signs is thus forbidden and that would be the “end of any medium”.

⁵ Actually the concept of implosion comes from McLuhan but Baudrillard elaborates it the other way

Today, the scene and mirror has given way to screens and network. “There is no longer any transcendence or depth, but only the immanent surface of operations unfolding, the smooth and functional surface of communication...the surrounding universe and our bodies are becoming monitoring screen” (Baudrillard 1988; p. 12). The over duplication of “presence” will eventually efface the opposition between presence and absence, as Baudrillard uses this as an illustration to explain that sexuality does not vanish in sublimation, repression and morality. It vanishes more effectively in what is more sexual than sex: pornography. It is like the hyperreality we have nowadays. In general, visible things do not result in disappearance; they simply vanish into what is more visible than the visible, all-too-visible, that is, obscenity. What lies behind the screen, according to Baudrillard, will be the void. Everything, every event mediated by the screen will dissolve in our life – behind the screen lie the paparazzi and behind the paparazzi, it is us – the audience. This triad relationship will go on in circulation and will eventually erase the panopticon seeing as Baudrillard calls it: the end of Panopticon.

We are witnessing the end of perspective and panoptic space (which remains a moral hypothesis bound up with every classical analysis of the “objective” essence of power), and hence the very abolition of the spectacular. Television...is no longer a spectacular medium. We are no longer in the society of spectacle...nor in the specific types of alienation and repression which this implied. The medium itself is no longer identifiable as such, and the merging of the medium and the message...is the first great formula of this new age. There is no longer diffracted in the real and it can no longer

be said that the latter is distorted by it.

(Baudrillard 1983; p. 54)

What causes trouble between McLuhan's dictum and Baudrillard's "the end of the medium" is the confusion between the senders and the receivers. In "the medium is the message", there is a clear distinction between the senders and the receivers, it is just a matter of power. Senders and receivers are placed in a circular relation – they are all imploded in simulation. This is what advertising is doing nowadays – a fabricated interviewer and a fabricated interviewee; a simulated product evaluation – all these point to one phenomenon, that is, the "end of medium".

The tele-distance ensures that speech literally no longer has any meaning. One says that one is speaking, but by speaking one is only verifying the network and the fact that one is linked up with it. There is not even an "other" at the other end, for in a simple reciprocation of signals of recognition there is no longer an identifiable transmitter or receiver, but simply two terminals. The one terminal's signal to the other is merely an indication that something is going through and that, therefore, nothing is happening. Perfect dissuasion

(Baudrillard 1990; p. 165)

In view of this, communication is not between two interlocutors but among many terminals – the one-to-one dualistic relationship between sender and receiver has been changed to one-to-many relationship between terminals. TV ads of those digital products like Sony, Nokia like to employ the idea of video-conferencing or screen communication in order to create an image of pioneer in technology. The hidden message: "once the screen is on, you will be automatically connected to the rest of the world" suggests, first of all, tele-communication is not something concerning sender

and receiver, but terminals (as it is only made effective through the screen); secondly, automatic means “each person is his/her own terminal” (Baudrillard 1988a; p. 21). Our existence is reduced to information, to be submitted to the entire network which is established among all social relations, operated by reciprocation, thus enables the symbiosis between human and the machine. TV was initially seen as an extension of man (McLuhan), but now it entails a reciprocal relationship. Reciprocal in a sense that we cannot deny our participation, it is a feed back loop. It is like that of the stick held by the blind: the stick itself is nothing for those without any walking problem, but it extends the tactility of the blind, enabling them to “see” virtually what lies ahead. As a habit of using the stick, the entire visual system has been inscribed into the stick and vice versa. The whole system becomes interrelationality as a feed back loop between the blind and the stick already activated. Obviously, TV cannot be seen as part of our body but we cannot eliminate it from our daily experience, as it is the domain where our sense of seeing touches on those electronically mediated codes. Therefore TV exists both in and out of our flesh and blood. The collapse of perspectival space as a result of interrelationality implies the moment that we see and at the same time to be seen. In hyperreality, any person that appears on the screen can be us. Baudrillard argues,

“Television, in the case of the Louds for example (an America documentary series), is no longer a spectacular medium. We are no longer in the society of spectacle which

the situationists talked about, nor in the specific types of alienation and repression which this implied.”

(Baudrillard 1990; p. 54)

This is similar to today’s TV entertainment news: the media employ the form of news presentation to present the “private” lives of the celebrities. If one still remembers, the Tang’s inheritance crisis (鄧家爭產事件) had once aroused many noises in society. The whole funeral of “*chang-gor*” (祥哥) is even transmitted live on TV – more fictional than fiction; more dramatic than drama. The whole incident was brought to the public domain and so all viewers were already participants – the dissolution of TV into life and the dissolution of life into TV. What we observe is that everyday events now become media drama, as a result,

scene and mirror have given ways to screen and network. There is no longer any transcendence or depth, but only the immanent surface of operation unfolding, the smooth and function surface of communication...the surrounding universe and our very bodies are becoming monitoring screens

(Baudrillard 1988a; p. 12)

Today, it is no longer “the Big Brother is watching you” instead, we should exclaim by saying, “Look, we are on TV” or “It is filming us”. Electronic media are now replacing our living experiences. McLuhan once called the former “hot” while the latter “cool”. With reference to a football match, the TV transmission makes what is supposed to be a live match to be a televised one, with the replays of all the shootings from different angles. Media simulation will eventually “cool down” all events so that there will be no more “hot” and “cool” but “simulated”. Events

televised help to “neutralize meaning, and involve the audience in a flat, one-dimensional experience” (Kellner 1989; p. 70). At that point, TV is considered a medium, which “suggests nothing”, and which is only a screen or rather a miniaturized terminal which in fact is found immediately in your head (Ibid.).

If it is the media that transformed everything into “cool” events, then, according to Baudrillard, the only thing the mass can do is to remain silent. To remain silent is not entirely passive. It is what the mass chooses to be – it is their choice. As in Kafka story “The silence of the Sirens”, silence can also be a weapon.

“Now the Sirens have still more terrible weapon than their song, namely their silence. Though it has never happened, it is perhaps conceivable that someone might have escaped from their singing, but from their silence certainly not. Against the feeling of having overcome them by one’s own strength, and against the resultant arrogance that sweeps everything with it, no earthly resistance is possible.”

(Kafka 1948; p. 101)

Certainly if no one can escape from simulation, silence is the weapon we can use to resist the implosion of meaning – the world is full of images, so rich in information that we have nothing to rely on, nothing to trust; we have lost our ways. In short, we become disoriented. However, critics like Michel de Certeau, for whom masses are able to appropriate or resignify the signs and meanings produced by the media, suggest some more optimistic approaches. This will be discussed in detail in the section of agency (Ch. 3)

Here, we should make a distinction between “hyperreality” and “virtual reality”

before we go on any further. Even though both suggest the divorce of signs from their real life referents, Baudrillard does not make any distinction between the two; instead he used them as equivalent. But critics like Poster and C. J. Keep warn against the danger of creating any confusion if the two terms are seen as analogous. For them, the term “hyperreality” is “constituted by the play of surfaces, by a paralytic fascination with exteriority, [whereas] the ‘virtual’ offers images with depth, images which one can enter, explore, and, perhaps most importantly, with which one can interact” (Poster 2001; p. 123). Poster is always in favour of a computer screen than a televised one. To him, the former does achieve the democracy of information through the Internet but the latter is still hegemonic because it is in the hand of a few capitalists and thus produces passive consumers. However, now the screen is not limited to the one at home, it can be seen everywhere. The audience is able to take up a more active role in the production / consumption of screenal image. The logic is simple: our everyday life could be any possible subject of TV – even if you are not a celebrity or public figure, you might still be the target of miniature camera without your knowledge. Paparazzi become a nuisance and technology has made their activities much more sophisticated. This, in return, upsets the relationship between private and public life; real and unreal (as people commonly believe that what appears on TV is only fictional). Therefore, when it comes to the discussion on agency, it is

important to bear in mind the discussion is not limited to TV but the entire concept of screen and network as they become not merely our extension but an integral part of us. To put it more precisely, the focus should be on the reciprocal relationship between human and the machine.

If the world we are experiencing is a virtual one, what will happen to the reality then? To answer this question, first of all, we have to make a differentiation between Real and reality. The Real, with a capital R, refers to Lacanian Real in the sense that it implies things that are not symbolized, and are excluded from the Symbolic Order, using his terms, the Name of the Father. Lacan said that things which do not exist in the Symbolic Order will appear in the Real. In other words, the Real is freed from all social institutions and (re)presentations. Since everyday objects are symbolized in the sense that they do mean something, the Real would represent precisely what is excluded from our reality, thus normal access is forbidden as we fail to situate or explore things that do not even carry a meaning. It is only through hallucination or schizophrenic experience can we enter the Real Order. Human beings usually take whatever they see, they experience concretely as real but in fact the Real is constant, unmovable and complete in Lacanian sense, and it is only human interpretation of the real that makes it possible for us to experience and to see, and this forms the basic of reality. Human experience of reality remains in the

Symbolic Order because it is through language or any means of representation that our perception is actualized and ready for interpretation. Whereas experiencing Lacanian Real objectively is impossible as it is beyond and behind imaginary perception and symbolic description.⁶

Even though the Real seems impossible for our daily access, it is still there, somewhere beyond our perception. It becomes a myth, a vestige. What is at stake is our perception of reality, which is only our symbolic interpretation of the Real. With constant striking from the “ecstasy” of information, our perception of reality will eventually be displaced and replaced. The relationship between signifier and signified will gradually be broken down as our experience of temporality of the past, the present, our memory and identity, become lost. In short, we are all schizophrenic. To tackle this problem, we have to position ourselves in a way that we can participate in the production of meanings. Again, this refers to the question of agency in the domain of communication.

1.1: Case Study: The Production of Reality in TV

This section illustrates how “reality” can be produced on TV. The logic behind corresponds to the importance of TV ads, that is, images presented on TV (no matter

⁶ for detail description of the Lacan’s theory, please refer to Sullivan-Ragland, Ellie: *Jacques Lacan & the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis*, Croom Helm Ltd, UK, 1986. pp. 187-189

news or TV ads) are self-referential and do not induce any meaning outside them.

Reality disappears into mediascape and simulation takes over. How does it happen on TV? This section aims at using existing events to illustrate the production of reality with reference to the September 11th incidence.

The “aura” of events has now been lost as they can be produced (and not re-produced as there is still a distinction between copy and original in reproduction – the second order of simulation) digitally through modern technology. So, what we are seeking are proofs – things that can serve as evidence of a historical existence. No doubt focuses will be on those immaterial things and not the course nor their consequences (as Baudrillard pointed out before: history, in linear sense, has come to an end because simulation makes people cast doubt on the existence of the cause). It is through these immaterial yet visible things like eyewitnesses, images, figures and casualties, that the sense of reality of events is unfolded before our eyes; by all means, it is an illusion of a historical event. However, all these are simulated in the sense that details are formulated from different angles: flashbacks, close-ups, as well as from computer simulation, scientific analysis, interviews etc. etc in order to conform to all conventions of a media event. It seems that “truths” are provided infinitely from all perspectives because it is no longer the “truth” that generates news but the other way round. The only trace of “reality” left behind is the one that can be found

on screen. Take a contemporary example of how reality is murdered –, an event which seems to have taken place exclusively on TV only, even to Americans. People sat at home only to watch what was happening lately out there. To the Afghanistan people, perhaps to the Taliban as well, CNN was their major source of information. However, watching the latest new reports on the September 11th incidence is like watching a Hollywood movie. The whole incidence embraced all the entertainment elements found in any Hollywood war movie: bloodsheds, gunshots, battlefields, heroes under attack etc. It is interesting that the news itself is supposed to be a piece of information, yet such information makes little difference with a Hollywood movie.

The power of TV is especially obvious in times of catastrophe. Americans have learned from the experience of World War II that images presented through the technique of *tele-visual* did create an astounding effect on individuals. They realized it is only through TV that people would believe that the “truth” of things is being presented. “The immediacy of television images makes such images appear unmanipulated. Television viewers get the impression that they are actually privy to what is going on because television images seem so real” (Louw 2001, pp. 175). In the recent example of September 11, Helen Burmester, who had lived through the two world wars, was watching the Morning Headlines as usual on that day. She admitted “the images on the television were more terrifying than anything she could

remember.”⁷ Horror and fascination are unfolded simultaneously before our eyes.

A sense of unreality is conveyed just like we recognize the elements of a Hollywood script seem to be coming “true” in real time.

The presentation by CNN was very much like a movie: the bombing scenes were presented from more than one angle: from the left, right, on high, eye-level and even close-ups. It seemed as if cameras had been placed on the burning tower before the second attack to capture the horrifying view of another passenger jet crashing into the other tower of WTC, or cameras had been set somewhere very near prior to the entire event. The hidden camera had successfully eliminated the sense of voyeurism as the viewers were no longer “voyeurizing” the scenes, but on the contrary, they seemed to be in the scene with the perspectival distance between them and the scenes having collapsed⁸ (Lane 2000, p. 98). The whole event seemed to have been pre-programmed by the US government and unfolded to the public according to schedule. All the “crew” waiting was the signal -- “action” -- from the director. Live commentary was included. Every piece of the event was recorded in details, flashbacks were provided with scene changes as the event proceeded. The footage of the jet smashing into the second tower was repeated up to 30 times per hour.⁹ It

⁷ Quotation from <http://www.journalism.berkeley.edu/ngn/attacks/madrid.html>

⁸ The idea comes from Richard J. Lane: “... with voyeurism, however intimate the scene being watched, there is always a perspectival distance, perhaps a window separating the subjects, or the distance between the scene and camera, and so on. But if the camera were ‘not there’, so to speak, then the collapsed distance means that the viewers were also in the scene.” (Lane 2000; p. 98)

⁹ information taken from Television Archive

was so detailed that the scene had eventually been replaced by the obscene.

Consider the following chronology of the event which was taken from BBC News¹⁰

0848

At the height of New York's morning rush hour American Airlines Flight 11 crashed into the north tower of the World Trade Center.

0903

News cameras trained on the burning tower captured the horrifying view of another passenger jet, United Airlines Flight 175, crashing into the south tower of the Trade Center causing a devastating explosion. It had left Boston for Los Angeles carrying 65 passengers and crew. It became clear that the catastrophe was not an accident

0910

In Florida President Bush was reading to children in a classroom when his chief of staff, Andrew Card, whispered news of the attacks into his ear.

0920

The FBI announced that it was investigating reports of planes being hijacked.

0929

Rescue workers and firefighters rushed to the foot of the World Trade Center as the upper floors blazed. On an ordinary day, up to 50,000 people would be working in the Trade Center.

0930

A grim-faced President Bush declared: "We have had a national tragedy. Two aeroplanes have crashed into the World Trade Center in an apparent terrorist attack on our country."

In less than an hour, scenes changed several times. After the first attack, it jumped to Florida, featuring the President enjoying his time with the kids when suddenly his ministers came in a hurry. A dramatic contrast was produced between the sense of a family reunion and that of a loss of the family. And then the scene soon changed back to the President delivering his speech for the attack, emphasis being put on his facial expression – "a grim face," which seems to be the sign the viewing audience were anticipating for media consumption. In a lapse of less than

http://tvnews3.televisionarchive.org/tvarchive/html/article_wul.html

an hour, viewers seemed to be watching a movie well edited before it was shown. Live on TV turned out to be mere Baudrillardian's simulation in Zurbrugg points out in his book *Art and Artefacts*.

"The...[event] seemed to many of us a pure product of Baudrillardian hyperreality in which the distinction between reality and its representation had become increasingly difficult to sustain. Fascination and horror at the reality which seems to unfold before our very eyes mingled with a pervasive sense of unreality as we recognized the elements of Hollywood script which had preceded the real, and as the signifiers of other events faded into those of the present."¹¹

(Zurbrugg 1997; p. 122)

Direct live transmission from CNN does not prove that the event is taking place. Instead, the more CNN claims to have immediate access to the real, the more the reality is reduced to pure information, which in turn, erases the sense of reality as the scene is taken over by the screen. Reality loses its identity when it reaches the velocity of real time information; in short, they are "dissolved" in information, which represents them and appears to us via a network of screen. A computer simulation of the bombing and a detailed graphic map of the building made the events more real than real. Scientific analysis was also introduced to explain the collapse of the towers. It seems that there was an urgent need to seek an explanation.

Reality has disappeared before our eyes or, at least, it only appears in the virtual sense. "Virtual" does not mean it is faked, rather, it can be more real than the real

¹⁰ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/static/in_depth/americas/2001/day_of_terror/timeline/default.stm

¹¹ Taken from Paul Patton, "This is not a war" *Jean Baudrillard, Art and Artefact*, pp. 121-135. Actually it was describing the Gulf War instead but as the logic behind is the same, I employ this idea on the bombing of the World Trade Centre.

(that is, hyperreal). The “Virtual” is always in the process of becoming the real. However, such a process is very often endless. No doubt Baudrillard wrote an essay “The Gulf War did not take place” because this was entirely a media war. This is the first time images of war were transmitted on TV “live” from the battlefield. Electronic technology, especially the *tele-visual* on television, eventually displaces the reality in the sense that “our access to the reality is often mediated by electronic channels” (Zurbrugg 1997; p. 126). It is not the reality but our perception of reality that has been displaced. In other words, it is the medium that determines the “realisticity” of reality. Even though CNN only presented a partial point of view, (that is, on behalf of the American) it is precisely that partial would make up the whole “truth”. It is ironic that the information presented is not entirely informative but informational, as Patton pointed out in his analysis,

“...while *tele-visual* information claims to provide immediate access to real events, in fact what it does is to produce informational events which stand in for the real, and which ‘inform’ public opinion which in turn affects the course of subsequent events, both real and informational”

(Zurbrugg 1997; pp. 126)

TV has actually diverted our attention from the content itself. It draws our attention only to the selected images deliberately chosen by capitalists. In the name of entertainment value, scenarios were played out, and “scripted” witnesses performed. This “national tragedy” was followed by a wide coverage of on-the-scene interviews with the spouse or relatives of those missing people. All along there were people

searching for their missing relatives or people lining up for blood donation, and all the time there were made-for-TV events: the grim face of the President, fears of those witnesses, tears of the who lost their beloved, blood of those casualties; all these become media commodities. Human tragedy here became a selling point to give pleasure to the viewing audience, or simply an occasion to make the ratings go up. It is precisely through these hyperreal screenal images that viewers are convinced that something has “really” happened.

We are living in hyperreality, according to Baudrillard; things that happen in hyperreality are manipulated under the logic of deterrence – as our society is simulated, there will never be any catastrophe. Deterrence is what causes something not to take place – just like the Gulf war, which is entirely a media event.

“We are no longer in a logic of the passage from virtual to actual but in a hyperrealist logic of the deterrence of the real by the virtual”

(Baudrillard 1991; p. 27)

Instead of reporting what has happened, the media “construct” what will be taking place there. The power of deterrence can “remove all certainty about facts and evidence [and] destabilize memory just as it destabilizes prediction.” (Baudrillard 1991; p. 17) It “wrecks the actual acting out of events, if they still take place – if they have taken place – destroys their credibility” (Ibid.). News makes everything credible; this is why TV advertising always employs such a technique (for instance, Sunday: *Weather Report*). The criterion of truth now depends on the principle of

credibility. Thus, within the course of a few hour of the catastrophe, news coverage shifted from reporting to imposing form and meaning upon the events in order to comprehend the whole story. CNN actually transformed what were supposed to be “unpredictable live events” into the familiar narrative pattern. This is why there were so many “inside stories” released right after the incident so as to ease the emotion of the masses. Americans do not know how to react, how to vent their emotion, so the first things the US president did is was to fabricate a verdict, to set an issue to divert of their attention as well as their emotion.

The inclusion of eyewitnesses is, perhaps, one of the evidences to reinforce the idea that the whole event did not exist in real sense. The so-called eyewitnesses were deprived of their lived experiences by “being submerged in the media network, by being...[appeared]...in front of their television screens” (Baudrillard 1991; p. 56). The screen became the fetish with all people, including those who had been on the scene; they all stuck to the screen to learn the latest news on CNN. Manhattan became the studio, the “virtual site” of the event, and the screen the only site of appearance. Similar to the Gulf war, as Baudrillard has indicated, in which “there were no warriors involved, only hostages: Saddam’s ‘guests’ and CNN’s audience – us” (Horrocks 1999; p. 118), this time, it is just one-man film. There was no enemy – the US government was the only director involved in this incident. Like

any of the Hollywood movies, for instance, *Batman*, there must be a hero and a criminal. Therefore, the US government “made” Bin Laden the convict (which he himself denied at the very beginning¹²) and the New York mayor Rudy Giuliani the hero. Consider the sharp increase in the support to Giuliani shortly after the incident (before he had been engaged in scandals). He was then transformed into a hero. Perhaps Americans at that time were thirsting for a hero because life was monotonous. The whole society was being crowded with many common men – even a graduate who obtained a third-honour graduation can be their president. In view of this, maybe Bush deliberately set this scene in order to “double the political arrogance of the Western Empire” (Baudrillard 1991; p. 76), to re-build the confidence of the American by creating a hero simply to increase the rating of the government in opinion polls.

The fact that the Both Bush and Bin Laden did not meet is another evidence of the absence of the event. They never saw each other face-to-face. Like in the Gulf War, America was fighting with a shadow enemy only.

It is also as ironic that the US enemy – Laden – exist in virtual sense only. His existence becomes codes, made ready for worldwide transmission via screen and network. The excess of information decedibilized both news and the catastrophe,

¹² Shortly after the attack, America has alone officially announced Bin Ladden should be responsible for the incidence.

and what is left behind are the traces that appeared on the screen like the existence of Laden. Everytime the US government officially declared their triumph and the death of Laden, Laden would appear on the screen to announce his survival. Screen and network has become Laden's best site to disappear and reappear. His death and survival "exist, [yet] simultaneously...disappearing" (Baudrillard 1988a, p. 11). The rumour that he is still alive has already been simulated and "being pressed into appearing before the television camera" (Baudrillard 1991; p. 55). Indeed, both defeat and victory are entirely simulation. Laden's existence has been "taken [as] hostage...and [we are] held [as] hostage too, as mystified TV viewers" (Ibid.) to witness his existence. His survival does not exist in real time but in CNN only. So, even if he died, this could only happen virtually.

There are even several archives in the Internet to record every bits and pieces of this event – as a record of "history". Internet is no doubt virtual and a record of a "historical" event in virtuality, by all means, is an alibi of existence in real time. Things that appear in virtual sense are traditionally considered to be fake; however, now it is exactly the opposite, because history no longer exists in real sense, only in virtuality that enables us to "retrieve" the very idea of "history". Nowadays, what is credible is history and what is history is what can be represented on the screen. The media are all "a gigantic machine" that generates events as information, as signs, as

“value exchangeable on the universal market of ideology” in short, “for producing non-event” (Baudrillard 2000; p. 132). In the past, meaning is produced by what a particular commodity can be exchanged for, that is, determined by its use value and exchange value. Now, such an exchange is impossible as events now can be exchanged for nothing. What is produced is not the event itself but signs of the event. Therefore, in order to prove that something has really taken place, we need this kind of archives which serves as a sort of memory banks since events have already been “disseminated in ‘real time’; where they disappear into the void of news and information” (Ibid.). Pictures, video clips, newspaper headline, commentaries are included in the archives. Such an establishment of a memory bank is not meant for recording history but mourning for the loss of history: excess information provided by TV and the Internet has, indeed, “invalidated the facts” (Baudrillard 1991; p. 58). As Baudrillard put it,

Explanation is always an alibi. The search for causes is always a denial of the event as such. It is the search for the condition in which it might not have taken place. Now, the event which might not have taken place (the ‘real’ event) is much less interesting than the one, which could not but have taken place (the ‘fated’ event).

(Baudrillard 2000; p. 135)

The distinction between a “real” and “fated” event is that the former is an accident while the latter coincidence. However, no matter whether it is accident or coincidence, there is an underlying fact that “what cannot happen (if the probability is zero) in a sense must happen” (Baudrillard 2000; p. 136) since every event must

“succumb to the urgent necessity of occurring” (Ibid.). The only thing we can prevent something from happening is to divert it. And one of the many functions of advertising is precisely to divert the audience’s attention, to release them and to make them relieved – release them from the scene of horror, and once again, to assure them what they have seen just now is, in a sense, fictional, just like the signs of the ads in which they are self-referential and in which it is impossible for them to seek any real life referent. The occurrence of any event could only be found on the screen.

The reason for using the September 11th incident as an example is to illustrate how horror, catastrophe and heroism are made televised objects ready for all TV viewers’ immediate consumption. In a postmodern world where everything has been dissolved in simulation, the screen converts “reality” into “signs”. In a world where the reality disappears, history come to an end; only signs are now being delineated as the real, or more precisely, as the basis of the real. In the coming chapter, the focuses will be on the sign system – how the consumption of reality is made effective through TV ads.

Chapter 2 the Nature of Sign

In the previous chapter I have discussed the importance of TV technology in making the contemporary postmodern society. Now, in this chapter, I will deal with the production of meaning through the study of signs – how signs can be decoded and function as the key to the study of postmodern logic of simulation and hyperreality.

Advertising works by appropriating, or drawing on meanings from the signification system that has been commonly accepted by the society. Advertising works by recruiting meanings from the context, and then constitutes meanings within the framework of the ads itself. When viewers decipher ads, they routinely accept the premise that signifiers and signifieds can be decontextualized, split up, and put together arbitrarily to other signifiers and signified, similarly abstracted from their earlier contexts. Contemporary advertising traffics endlessly in decontextualized, hence, “free floating signifiers” (Goldman 1998; p. 25), combining and recombining them without limit.

This chapter is divided into six sections altogether with the first three sections mainly dealing with the nature of Signs according to de Saussure, Barthes and Baudrillard respectively, then followed by Baudrillard’s image of the desert, the phenomenon of sign in its “zero degree”. Afterwards the case study in Hong Kong show how far the image of desert (sign in its zero degree) can be applied to Hong

Kong TV advertising industry and how this induces postmodern consumption.

The question of signs has remained hitherto problematic, not only because of the derivation of meaning, but also, to a certain extent, because of its relation to the problem of discourse and representation. A Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, has named the term Semiology as a scientific study of signs. In the domain of semiology where we are all mastered by different regimes of representation and language. Language, in its broadest sense, refers to any means of communication. Thus, the study of visual image, be it body gestures, TV advertisement, fashions or even music, which function as signs, is included in the entire language system. Our discussion will begin from Saussure's legacy, our focus being on the division of "signifier" and "signified", then we will proceed to Barthes' ideas on "connotation" and "denotation", and finally come to Baudrillard's discussion of symbolic value of signs.

2.1 Saussure: Language is the system of signs.

According to Saussure, signs can be broken into two main elements. He calls the first element "signifier" and the second one "signified". Both signifier and signified are inter-related in order to produce meaning, but, such a relation is often arbitrary. Therefore, their relationship is never static but always varies from time to

time and from region to region as quoted from Culler analysis of de Saussure,

There is no natural or inevitable link between signifier and the signified

(Culler, 1986, p. 19)

Moreover, what signify are not the letters nor the utterance but the difference between these letters, utterances and other letters or utterances. Therefore, according to Saussure, it is the difference that produces meaning. This differentiation is important to Saussure's linguistics. Very often differences are operated by means of binary oppositions, tree/flowers, red/green male/female etc. etc.. However, as Derrida has pointed out in his theory of *difference*, meaning will be endlessly deferred under binary system. Thus, there is still a leakage in this approach to the production of meaning.

Despite all, Saussure's contribution lies not in the approach to the production of meaning but in the ways in which the process of representation operates. The entire language system not only operates on the level of signifier and signified but also governed by some underlying codes or rules. Saussure divided the whole language system into two major categories, *la langue* (language) and *parole* (speech). *La langue* can be understood as the concept; the entire system of representation governed by different means of rules; while *parole* refers to individual speech acts, that is, the utterance. Saussure successfully drew the attention to the whole representation system as a social practice which paves the ways for the post-structuralists like

Barthes, Baudrillard and Derrida to further the discussion on the cultural level.

2.2 Barthes and his idea of Mythology

Barthes made an attempt at extending Saussure's linguistic analysis on the level of cultural discussion. What Saussure concerned was the relationship between signifier and signified, but Roland Barthes moved one step further: the cultural meaning. For Saussure, such a relationship is arbitrary: there is no intrinsic connection between signifier and signified. Yet for Barthes, signs do "admit a degree of motivation, or analogy, between signified and signified" (Barthes 1977; p. 24). In *Mythologies*, the discussion covers a wide range of cultural messages found in our daily life such as advertisements, sports, films, etc.. In "Myth Today", Barthes even proposed a method of reading system of signs in culture called semiology. To him, these signs are all "myth", not only because the word entails a sense of speech, (in Greek, *muthos* means speech), but also because these messages are mysterious to a certain extent as he wrote

"Speech of this kind is a message. It is therefore by no means confined to oral speech. It can consist of modes of writing or of representations; not only written discourse, but also photograph, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity, all these can serve as a support to mythical speech."

(Barthes 1972; p. 110)

What myth does is to "pass off an arbitrary sign as a natural, analogical one"

(Barthes 1977; p. 24.). To him, myth is a system of communication, not merely a message but, most importantly, “a message produced by a certain signification mechanism” (Barthes 1977; p. 22). Barthes foresees the danger of myth in allowing “layers of meaning to accumulate within its representations of culture, and encourages unreflective practices” (Trifonas 2001; p. 10). In order to rectify this, Barthes’ attempt was, first of all, to decode the message and then to evaluate their relationship with mass culture. He proposed the idea of Semiology¹ as a means to decipher the hidden codes because “semiology is a science of forms, since it studies significations apart from their content” (Barthes 1972; p. 111). Semiology aims to create a “meta-language” (a critical language or discourse) which will be useful for analyzing forms and structures of representation as parts encoded within the logic of a system. It is precisely the form (and not the content) which constitutes the nature of myth. Thus, semiology is not dealing with the content but the form of the message – how these messages are constituted and made meaningful. What it does was to “make the natural, the taken-for-granted, appear strange and remote [in order] to establish unsuspected connections, to subvert cultural hierarchies” (Barthes 1977; p. 21). Thus, wresting is no longer sports but a spectacle. According to Barthes, in order to understand myth, we have to de-mythify signs or codes that are created or

¹ In Greek, *semeion* means signs

reinforced by the cultural ideology for ideology is the core of all mythology. Myth neutralizes our responses because there is “unquestioning faith in the message”, hence myth characterizes “what-goes-without-saying (Barthes 1972; p. 11). The cultural logic that is expounded through mythology attempts to reduce differences of interpretation and limits the excesses of meaning. Myths generalize experience to bring out a consensus on how we perceive reality, face the living conditions, and act in respect to the difference of others as a community.

According to the interpretation of mythology presented by Barthes, myth is a model of signification. It has the power to make mythical speech suitable for communication, be it ancient or modern. It contains nothing “natural” for “myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the ‘nature’ of things” (Barthes 1972; p. 110). Therefore, all kinds of symbols, signs, images, words are all considered as “speech”, ready to be “appropriated” in every structure of “myth”.

Barthes’ idea of myth does extend Saussure’s linguistic analysis to the cultural level. To Barthes, myth is the result of ideology with an aim to serve particular interests of controlling culture with an attempt to use myth to promote cultural reproduction. Myth functions on two levels: the primary level is what Barthes called “signifying plane” – it contains the “factual” system of representation in which

objects are signified. This is the first order of signification. It “gives an alibi for keeping the form of representation separate from the content of representation” (Barthes 1972; p. 110). Afterwards, the end product of the first order will then proceed onward and becomes the new signifier for the second order. The secondary level, the “symbolic realm of association” or “empty signifier”, concerns the symbolic system in which cultural meanings are derived. It “generates another plane of meaning beyond the cultural object or practice by giving representation the power of truth as presence” (Barthes 1972; p. 110). Myth achieves its aim for producing ideological effect by distorting reality – it “turns bias and prejudice into history” (ibid.). It forbids any questioning for all questions have already been turned into answers with the power of myth.

The triad relationship between signifier, signified and referent is brought onto a new level. A message, linking a signifier with a signified, will become the new signifier of the new signified. In the first stage, commonly known as denotation, is purely linguistic analysis. But what meaning the concept entails is already the domain of the second stage, that is, the connotation. It is at this stage that Barthes successfully extends the analysis from individual sign to sign system. The product of Saussure’s signifier-signified combination is brought onto the level of cultural analysis. Barthes analyzes an advertisement that he comes across in a barbershop by

using his denotation-connotation approach (Barthes 1972, p. 116). In short, the operation of Barthes approach can be summarized in the following diagram:

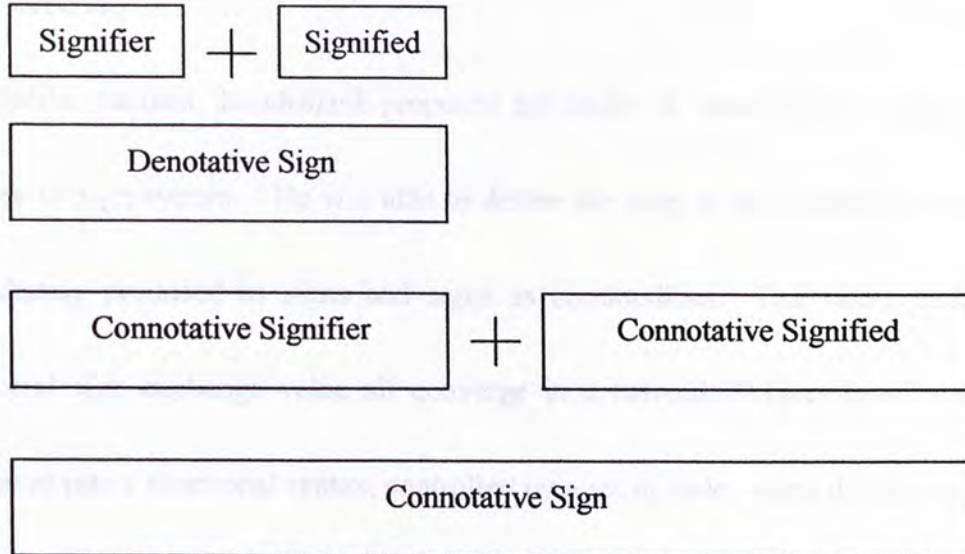


Figure 1: the flow of signifier/signified in Barthes' model

This level allows us to interpret the signifier in a wider realm of social ideology.

The study of connotation is crucial in cultural studies because what we are concerned about is to what extent these signifiers mean to us. In the discourse of advertising industry, our concern is metalanguage in the language of advertising. Metalanguage is the use of language about language. It functions as a system to explain how receivers respond to signs. The point of reading is thus somehow determined by the structure and codes in which a reader engages. Therefore the question of agency will become the key concept in the advertising industry.

Even though the system of myth can be a way to decipher the advertising system, Barthes did not go far enough. The leakage in semiology lies in the way it still

sticks to a definite universal meaning of an object. This leakage is later modified by Baudrillard in the sense that in his order of simulation, all signs become self-referential.

Unlike Barthes, Baudrillard proposed his order of simulation to explain the mystery of sign system. He was able to define the stage at which commodities are immediately produced as signs and signs as commodities. Use value, exchange value and sign exchange value all converge in a two-side “object form” and are integrated into a functional syntax, controlled by a set of code, which determines their circulation.

2.3 Baudrillard’s model of signification: All Signs must Burn

Baudrillard’s idea can be divided into three periods: the first one refers to his early writing including *The System of Object*, *The Consumer society* & *For a Critique of the Political Economy of Signs*. His analysis in these three pieces is still based on the traditional Marxist model; however, starting from the last book in this period, Baudrillard began to see the inadequacy of Marx on accounts of postmodern phenomenon. Ever since his *Mirror of Production*, Baudrillard has determined to break up with Marxism and starts thinking of a model which is later defined as simulation; this is the beginning of his second period. The third period begin since

his writing *Seduction*, as simulation becomes more and more imploded, more and more hyperrealistic, Baudrillard is thinking of a concept based on indifference and equivalence. Signification process begin to “expire” in this period as the signifier fails to match with its signified; individual reading ability is thus introduced to produce meaning and this paves the way for our study of agency.

Baudrillard, in his early writing, combined semiology with Marxist concept of Use Value and Exchange Value. For him, the crucial feature of consumer society is “the proliferation of commodity signs”(Kellner 1989; p. 21). Saussure’s semiological model is used for analyzing the system of commodities. Commodities, like language, consist of both signifier and signified “with the feature of both abstraction, equivalence and interchangeability” (Ibid). Baudrillard made his first attempt to establish a system of signs using semiological approach.

Baudrillard defines the early stage at which commodities are immediately produced as signs and signs commodities. In his earlier work *The Consumer Society*, Baudrillard made his first attempt to analyze the structure of an affluent society and the idea of a consumer. To him, consumption is no longer an act for satisfying individual needs but a social practice. An Individual consumes for the sake of seeking identification and difference, for social status and reputation. In other words, what is consumed are not merely commodities. Apart from what Marx called Use

Value and Exchange Value, commodities also contain what Baudrillard called Sign Value (or Sign Exchange Value). To Baudrillard, the consumer society is made up of hierarchies of sign value and it is advertising that helps the allocation of signs.

Mass consumption in the late industrial period has resulted in a “society of spectacle” (Debord 1995). Accumulation of capital has turned everything into signs, be it arts, TV, football etc. The spectacle is “not a collection of images but a social relationship among people, mediated by images” (Horrocks 1999; p. 12). However, such an accumulation also means capitalist repression. While the majority regard this as a sort of aggression, Baudrillard called this repression “ambience” – as stated in Horrocks’ analysis – which means a situation “where society becomes controlled through its inclusion in the spectacle of consumption [which] was not just a passive moment after good were produced and sold but a new phase of capitalism...affluent society” (Horrocks 1999; p. 13). So we are all surrounded by objects and codes, just for the aim of perpetual shopping.

An atmosphere of “false need” is created in order to arouse our desire for shopping². Similar to the operation of Barthes’ fashion system, consumption is also a linguistic system (*la langue*) in opposition to individual effects of speech (*parole*). The code of consumption reduces objects to pure signs instead of individual

² This idea comes from the Frankfurt School, particularly Marcuse’s *One Dimensional Man*

expression of need and pressure in their act of consumption. Therefore, an object will not be an object anymore but it is liberated and transformed into a sign with its value determined by a disciplinary cultural code; and it is within this code that consumers consume the relations between these signs.

Using the Marxist idea of commodity form, Baudrillard developed his idea of Sign Value or (Sign Exchange Value) on top of the existing Use Value and Exchange Value in his early analysis. There are altogether four different kinds of logic of value (Baudrillard 1972, p. 145)

1. The functional logic of use value
2. The economic logic of exchange value
3. The differential logic of sign value
4. The logic of symbolic exchange

Use value, as its name suggests, refers to the usefulness of an object in nature while Exchange Value is what the object can be exchanged for. Sign value signals the difference while symbolic exchange signals ambivalence. Take the case of a skirt, originally it may be meant for hiding our bodies (Use Value) but it can also be exchanged for something else, for instance, money (Exchange Value). As for the Sign Exchange Value, using the previous example, it means that people wearing skirt as a means to convey, for instance, a sense of femininity. Thus Sign Exchange Value refers to the substitutability of sign inside the system of communication.

- Marx Commodity form = $\frac{\text{Economic Exchange Value (that is, price)}}{\text{Use Value (Utility)}}$
- Linguistic Sign form = $\frac{\text{Signifier}}{\text{Signified}}$

Combining sign form with commodity form, we have:

$$\frac{\text{Economic Exchange Value}}{\text{Use Value}} = \frac{\text{Signifier}}{\text{Signified}}$$

The relation between Exchange Value and Use Value is the same as that between the signifier and the signified. Using Barthes' terms of "denotation" and "connotation", the former can be seen equivalent to "Use Value" while the latter "Sign Exchange Value". Object cannot be interchanged at the denotation level as object cannot escape from its Use Value, but as objects are reduced to merely signs for infinite circulation, once outside the system of denotation, they are free to substitute for one another, that is, on the level of "connotation". The chain linking the two systems together is consumption.

Consumption, according to Baudrillard, links the two structures together. Consumption is the stage where the commodity is produced as a sign and signs (culture) are produced as commodities. This is the period in which Baudrillard still upheld the link between signifier and signified.

However in the latter period of Baudrillard writing (ever since *The Mirror of Production*), he broke up with Marxism. *Mirror of Production* is his first critique of

Marxism. Baudrillard argues that Marx's theories are

“too conservative to be useful to revolutionary theory because they are too deeply embedded in political economy to be of use in constructing a new social order free from the imperative of production and political economy”

(quoted from Kellner 1989; p. 40)

In proposing that consumption and all social practices in capitalist society are mastered by use value and exchange value³, Baudrillard argues that there should not be any other value but only symbolic value. This is because in Marx analysis, both needs and uses are socially constructed, that is, through the pre-determined hierarchies of sign within the political economy. Therefore, it is meaningless to use these values to attack the “alleged distortions under capitalism” (Kellner 1989; p. 34). Besides, Marx did not take into account the development of technology especially that of the mass media (Ibid.). What Baudrillard witnessed in the postmodern period is the absence of the referent in mass communication (for instance TV), which means that there is the need to revise the semiological model as the linking between signifier and signified, between sign and referent is now missing. For these reasons, Baudrillard introduced the a new method in analyzing the signification model, that is, his concept of “symbolic exchange” with an attempt to reunify Use Value with

³ That is, refer to the idea that what is valuable is that which is useful or worth in terms of money.

Exchange Value; signifier with signified in his work *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Baudrillard, 1988) and thereafter.

Baudrillard, in his earlier days, selectively made use of semiology based on Saussure and Barthes to foreground the sign function of the object. However in his latter work, Baudrillard proposed his order of simulation to explain the mystery of sign system and thus broke up with the former two. He rewrote the signification model by stressing the idea of referent as a reflection of Sign and not, as Barthes pointed out, the terminus of the signifier-signified relationship. In a world dominated by simulation, it is impossible to produce meaning based on the operation of semiology for what semiology “tries to do is to domesticate the sign” (Gane 1993; p. 141). However, what Baudrillard witnessed is a world “where illusion or magic thought plays a key role, the signs evolve, they concatenate and produce themselves, always upon one another, so that there is absolutely no basic reference which can sustain them” (ibid). It is in this situation that he proposed the idea of reversibility, that is, the game of seduction (please refer to Chapter 1 for details).

In the late 20th century, signs seem to be separated from their referent, resulting in a “structure that resembles the signal: signifiers act like traffic lights, emitting meanings to which there is no linguistic response” (Poster 1988; p. 4). Signifiers thus become floating, especially but not exclusively as TV ads constitute a new

language form in which the “code transmits signifiers to the population who are subject to the ‘terroristic’ mode of signification”(Ibid). This marks the beginning of the postmodern society which is no longer governed by the production and consumption of commodities (as in the modern society) but “organized around simulation and the play of images and signs, denoting a situation in which codes, models and signs are the organizing principle of a new social order in which simulation rules” (Kellner 1994; p. 8)

As the major concepts of Baudrillard have already been laid out in Chapter 1, I will not go into details of simulation again. I just want to point out that in the age of hypersignification, particularly between the third and the fourth order simulation, as both of them determine the role of signifier and the structure of communication in postmodern era. The order of simulation is summarized in the following chart that has been taken out from *Baudrillard & Signs* (Genosko 1994, p. 42)

Order	Form	Law	Semiotics	Process
0	Feudal/caste societies – signs and their meanings are pre-determined			
1	Natural	Counterfeit	Arbitrariness	Corrupt Symbol
2	Market	Production	Seriality	Icon
3	Structural	Simulation	Codification	Linguistic Sign
4	Fractal	Proliferation	Viral metonymy	Index

Figure 2: The order of simulation

2.3.1 Postmodern Hyperreality

The third order simulation marks the end of any dialectic dualism. Signification disappears from view because it hinders the marshalling of forces against value. A new order thus established is based on the formula "more X than X". With the collapse of simulation and reality, the real disappears. (or as argued in Chapter 1, it becomes Lacanian Real where normal access is forbidden unless through hallucination). All boundaries are removed, hence all signs imploded such as sex and pornography, beauty and fashion, news and entertainment, politics and drama, wars and film, most importantly, TV ads and everyday life.

In hyperreality, the real and the imaginary collapse, hence event becomes media event and vice versa, resulting in what Baudrillard called the "implosion of the social". Signifiers are totally emancipated from the signified and the referential. What, then, lies beyond hyperreality? Baudrillard introduced a fourth stage in "what are you doing after the orgy?" The orgy signified all the explosive forms of liberation, which have characterized modernity. Baudrillard described the fourth stage as fractal, which means, "a sort of proliferation of value, a species of an epidemic of value, but in which value has been completely fractalized and can no longer be located" (Baudrillard 1989, p. 22). Unlike Saussure and Barthes, Baudrillard

proposed a non-linear approach to the study of sign. The fourth stage is viral, fractal, the “irradiated stage of value” (Ibid.) in which there is no longer reference at all. A law of value gives way to a “cancerous proliferation” (ibid) (for instance, the *Sunday* advertising campaign) which cannot be brought under control by any discipline of code. When Baudrillard refers to the dispersion of signifiers, with ubiquitous system of signs, simulacra, and digitized codes, the status of signified and referent “loses out” in the process of signification. Signifier now bears no meaning; it appears as if it has long been there for no reason, in short, categorized by Baudrillard as “zero-degree”. This is precisely the advertising industry nowadays. No doubt Baudrillard used “Absolute Advertising, Ground-Zero Advertising” as the title, precisely because “it has no depth”; it is “instantaneous but also instantaneously forgotten” and this is “unarticulated, instantaneous form, without a past, without a future, without the possibility of metamorphosis”. In short, advertising industry embraces all criteria of being fractal. By Fractal, Baudrillard refers to endless proliferation of signs. However, as he does not state its definition clearly in his work, most people do not take that order into consideration.

The predominant sign of the fourth order is index, which is not to exclude iconicity since every index has a certain character, a firstness (Genosko 1994; p. 283), although generally speaking, indices “have no significant resemblance to their

objects” (ibid, p. 306). When there is a twin relationship of secondariness between a sign and an object, this sign is an index.

Indices, as the end product after total emancipation of signifiers, direct one’s attention to object by “blind compulsion” (Genosko 1994; p. 286). They exercise a certain force like the symptom of a disease in which the symptom is connected with its “object” but of course there is always a possibility that these symptoms “directs” to the wrong direction, hence for individuals who want to be on the right path, they must know the tactics, otherwise they will be endlessly trapped in the maze of these “floating signifiers”. References do not disappear in the fractal order. The difference between the third and the fourth order is that in the third order simulacrum, objects, like Disneyland, somehow contrive to determine sign of themselves. An index, on the contrary, is “a sign determined by its dynamic object by virtue of being in a real relation to it” (Baudrillard 1993; p. 335). An index tells one nothing about the nature of its dynamic object. It is simply connected with it or focuses attention on it. This is precisely what TV ads are practicing nowadays. In the advertising industry, even though Baudrillard claimed that the advertising system is located in the third order simulation, nowadays, not only are ads shown on TV their own reference, but also their job is growing to be more and more signifying for the sake of signifying only. Some ads, like the HSBC investment projects (released in the year 2000),

show only a series of numbers on the screen. It seems that the frame has frozen, as there is nothing else until the very last moment when audience realize it refers to the number of hotline. The numbers act like indices which may guide the audience to the right direction and leads them out of the maze (that is, to find the answer) but at the same time the answer audience find may not be the way they are looking for. These signifiers on TV ads work best to signify, but they fail to signify for anyone; hence the audience need to practise their own appropriation of meaning. However, Baudrillard does not go far enough for his indexical events do not tell us anything about the nature of the culture of the fourth order.

Nowadays signifiers just stand in for the sake of signification. The postmodern world is a universe of endless proliferation of artefacts and events that consist wholly of spectacular surfaces, pure simulacra and undefined codes. The role of addresser and addressee becomes blurred. In the traditional model of communication presented by Jaboson, for any effective communication, there must be a sender and a receiver.

Transmitter – Message – Receiver
Encoder – Message – Decoder

But in Baudrillard's order of simulation, communication becomes a simulacrum because signifiers do not communicate but engage in proliferation of self-duplication. This is similar to Deleuze and Guattari's idea of asignification, which Baudrillard's

forth order is usually compared to. According to Deleuze and Guattari, not all substances are linguistically formed such as our genetic code – DNA (Deleuze & Guattari 1977: 279-303).

In the case of DNA, it is by all means a message but there is neither an addresser nor an addressee; neither a subject nor an interpreter (Deleuze & Guattari 1977, p. 281). In the postmodern age, signs are becoming more and more indexical. Indices do not lead one away from themselves to their objects, rather they exhibit their objects' characteristics in themselves. Hence, the answer should not lie outside their own shadow (as Baudrillard has pointed out, "referent (of a sign) cannot jump over its shadow"). But what we should do is to exercise a polysemiotics reading of signs (as opposed to the traditional semiological model – the linear study of signifier-signified, sign-referent as presented by both Saussure and Barthes), similar to Baudrillard's anti-semiology, both ideas serve as a challenge to the signification system.

Within the Baudrillardian model of simulation, to a certain extent, we can bring his idea on the fourth order – fractal – into the discussion between Hong Kong and America. Although the two places are quite different in most people's eye, I just want to bring in the discussion on Baudrillard's analysis on America concerning the image of desert and see to what extent such an image can be applied to the situation in Hong Kong. "Fractal" is the word used to describe the culture in both Hong Kong

and America inside the Baudrillardian model as both of them are “a seismic form: a fractal, interstitial culture born from a rift of the Old world, a tactile, fragile, mobile, superficial culture” (Baudrillard 1988; p. 127). Baudrillard used the image of desert to illustrate this idea (the metaphor of desert will be discussed in the next sections). In short, both American and Hong Kong culture are a “culture of zero degree”, a culture that best characterizes the postmodern features of pastiche, fragmentation, fractal and schizophrenic. In the following section, I will examine how Baudrillard’s fractal orders, the culture of zero degree, can be applied to Hong Kong culture.

2.4 Image of Desert

In the eyes of Baudrillard, the idea of desert is best to describe the culture of “zero degree”. In a place where scene and stage are taken over by screen and network, constant delivery of images gradually erases all sense of reality. Like the postmodern sign, the infinite system of simulation of absence in the desert serves as an immanently reversible presence, hence “total absence equals pure presence” (Baudrillard 1988; p. 24). With its hyperreal nature, all differences are reduced to empty signs which carry no meaning, thus contributing to a sense of emptiness, or using Baudrillard’s term, a “zero degree” culture.

Why desert? Desert in *America* is “a kind of sidereal location. In such a place

one let oneself drift freely while still retaining – even at its most extreme limits – a sense of simulation” (Gane 1993; p. 132). The reason why desert is fascinating is “because you are delivered from all depth there – a brilliant, superficial neutrality, a challenge to meaning and profundity, a challenge to nature and culture, an outer hyperspace, with no origin, no reference point” (Gane 1993; p. 214). In short, any place will be classified as desert for its indifference and without depth.

The desert is the emblem of America. Everywhere you look you find the sign of it replicated over and over again. Consider the reason why someone will become lost in a postmodern mall or cannot find his way out when driving in a new urban district like Manhattan in America. It is not because no indication is provided, but, on the contrary, because there are has so many indications that people feel dizzy. The metropolis offers the same “desert-like banality of televisual scenery” (Baudrillard 1988; p. 9). The desert, on the other hand, offers “extreme deliverance from loved social space, temporality and desire” (Ross 1997; p. 222). The desert is obscene and fascinating because it has “eliminate every possible means of seduction” (ibid). Whereas, as opposed to Europe (or China, as in the case of Hong Kong), which is rich in aesthetic meaning for Baudrillard, it has its own well-defined set of codes and practices. While in Europe, the over-a-thousand year history and cultural background make meaning effective, America (and Hong Kong maybe) is vastly

superficial and displays an obscene one-dimensionality of signs – it is like a desert, emptied of aesthetic meaning (Baudrillard 1988; p. 124). Lacking seduction, everything is made available and pornographic in America – talk shows and new show exposes (Baudrillard 1988; p. 7). The TV flows between real-life and video representation make the value of their separation nearly indiscernible. Owing to the “hypervisibility of these pornographic images and their corresponding loss of scene...the real can only be a continuation of representation” (Ross 1997; p. 224). America and Hong Kong can only be virtually real because they are societies, which constantly view their own reflection on a TV screen. Reality is thus replaced by the emptiness of a TV representation.

Everything appears in the postmodern light as the most unreal thing – a perpetual reduplication and simulation of itself. Coincidentally, the myth of desert plays an essential role among critics like Baudrillard and Virilio. The desert is empty of meaning, an unnatural and superficial flat for the recording of speed. Nothing makes any sense there. Both Hong Kong and America are voids teeming with simulacra. Like what Japan means for Barthes, America for Baudrillard, Hong Kong is a fascinating place in my eyes.

Hong Kong used to be called a “cultural desert”. It takes time to establish its own aesthetic values. At present, it seems that it only thrives on the obscenity of

image, the hyperreality and simulation. As Hong Kong, similar to America to a certain extent, does not have a heritage of its own, it craves to create one. The source for the American is Disneyland as well as Hollywood and that for Hong Kong comes from TV. Disneyland and Hollywood are the places where the American manufactured their own set of historical and cultural values. Similarly, TV brought an astounding effect for Hong Kong people to establish their sense of identity. This is one of the reasons why TV advertising and not advertising in other media is my chief concern.

A desert is, in short, a sublime space. It is filled with passion and astonishment – the post powerful effect of the sublime in nature. Everything is already in its superlative stage. However, the desert is said to mean that, notwithstanding its power and our fear in the face of it, we are superior to it as we are conscious moral agents. In case of America, it is

“heir to the deserts. They are not part of nature as opposed to cities, they designate the emptiness, the radical nudity which is behind every human establishment. At the same time, they designate human institutions as a metaphor of this emptiness, and the work of man as continuous with the desert, culture as a mirage and the perpetuity of the simulacrum.”

(Baudrillard 1988; p. 126)

Not only does America resemble a desert but Baudrillard thought the whole America is, in fact, a desert.

What the so-called collapse of nature / culture distinction, one epiphanizes heat, the hallucinogenic glaze which hangs over the desert and runs into the city along the

highway, chased by ghostly swirls of dust. The casinos of Las Vegas resemble the erosional forms of the desert and the artificial glows of neon washes over the environment like the varnish which appears over the countless pebbles on desert pavement. Culture is as shiftily as a dune of pure sand.

(Genosko 1994; p. 123)

This is particularly interesting as the whole description above can also be applicable to Hong Kong. Pastiche is everywhere, filled with new buildings and old buildings (for instance, Times Square); information can be obtained everywhere but none is informative; Hong Kong claiming to be democratic, scandals from politicians are constantly revealed. America (and so Hong Kong) is an anti-utopia in the eyes of Baudrillard because what has been realized is imaginary. The combination of the first and the third stage of simulation has resulted in a real fiction. In America, “the difference or gap between a utopia as a picture of what is possible and a social world no longer obtain...everything [there] is real, pragmatic, and it makes you all wonder” (Baudrillard 1988; p.7), like a mirage lying on the threshold between reality and virtuality – it is real yet cannot last long.

The desert is also considered “sensible plates for recording the speed record” (Virilio 1986; p. 194). As the site of speed itself and a surface of pure superficiality, America is a place where “speed records were ‘engraved’, and resulted in a distinctive features of desert, that of ‘aesthetic of disappearance’.” (Baudrillard 1988; p.5) The technological achievement of high speed will erase our sense of time and dimension. TV ads fill every second with endless images and signs, which

accelerate our sense of a loss dimension. Reality disappears in front of our eyes so that “objects in the mirror may be closer than they appear” (Baudrillard 1988; p. 10). Hong Kong, as well as America is approaching the “vanishing point” of social, meaning truth, history and real (Baudrillard 1988; p. 10). The simulation formula – more X than X – has led us all onto the journey of no return. Perhaps the only return can be done in terms of nostalgia.

Something is hyper when it is excessive and exaggerated. It is always more and more. The hyperreal is more real than the real; what makes the real hyper is that it is more, and so much more that there appears to be no way to turn back to a previous condition of less than hyper. In some cases, the more the one turns back, the more hyperreal nostalgia he becomes. No doubt Hong Kong people nowadays like to talk about things that happened in the past, for instance, the food, the ways of living, the fashion etc. Nostalgia becomes the new style, applied in every aspect of our life.

Whenever you ask for something more, it implies the idea of not enough. The trick of advertising lies precisely in your desire of asking for more. But in asking for more (like the Pepsi slogan – Ask For More), you cannot go back to your previous status, hence of no return – you can only move forward, onward but not backward. The Pepsi interpretation of the slogan “Ask for more” is “longing for infinity” (渴望

無限). In the ad (the Hope series, released in the year 2000) featuring a famous Hong Kong singer Faye Wong who goes back to her previous classroom in Primary school, looking at those old days picture on the wall. Then suddenly the scene flashes back to the old days where Faye, as a small kid, is having her music lesson. Once she makes an attempt to play the piano, the scene changes when Faye Wong is swimming through time and space and finally goes back to the present and the words “ask for more” appears. By hope the ad itself suggests at the very beginning that it can never be fulfilled as Faye Wong makes an attempt to head for the sun by stretching her hands out. It will be an endless longing, by asking more, people may have a feeling that they are getting closer and closer to the fulfillment of their desires. However, such a process heading for fulfillment is, as suggests by the ad, an infinity.

The practice of asking for more is typically found in America and Hong Kong: “one more” or “some more” is the expression commonly heard among us. Comparatively speaking, our cultural heritage burden is not as heavy as that of the Mainlanders (like the American when compared to the European). This maybe the reason why it is less presumable for us to proceed without looking back. But soon after the June 4th incident in 1989, Hong Kong people began to realize its affinity with China, thus arousing a feeling of “sharing the same flesh and blood”. Hence, around that period there was a fever for nostalgic things. When the simulation formula

continues and reaches its vanishing point, it will wash away everything in our brain, including our sense of time and dimension and then, our loss dimension will erase our sense of consciousness and perception by means of which we know the world and our place in it. If this is the case, communication will be horizontalized like the desert: “reduced to a flat, screen-like surface which stimulates a sense of occasion without depth, affect, or history” (Baudrillard 1988; p. 215). However, maybe Baudrillard was over pessimistic because with the question of agency, the situation will not be as worse as he predicted.

The desert is also a site where signs disappear, leaving only the indifference of pure object, neutrality, and dead images that characterize contemporary America and Hong Kong. Take a look at today’s advertising industry: advertising image keeps on duplicating themselves on screen, behind the screen is just another surface, leaving America and Hong Kong the destiny of indifference, or as Baudrillard called it, “the desertification of meaning.” (Baudrillard 1988; p. 5) As predicted by Baudrillard, what is left behind is only obscenity. Without the screen, nothing carries any meaning. This is why both places are considered as “virtually existing” in Baudrillard analysis.

Baudrillard sees America not only as a desert, but also a place of “primitive culture” because of the absence of a rich historical or cultural past to root itself and

“from which to reflect upon the present moment” (Baudrillard 1988; p. 7). In its totally primitive state, America replaces a sense of history, and culture is manufactured by the simulation industries. Like the speed with which signs of the desert reduplicate themselves before Baudrillard as he travels across it, the place leaves him without reference point or origin, so that Baudrillard experienced a cancellation of the difference and an implosion of a sense of history which he later commented that “speed creates pure objects. The desert is itself a pure object, since it cancels out the ground and territorial reference-points, since it runs ahead of time and to annul time itself” (Baudrillard 1988; p. 6).

Baudrillard disappeared into the superficiality of America, a space emptied of sense. The desert is irreducible to its surface effects. Many of the signs found in the desert are empty of meaning, as Baudrillard has put it, from the vantage point of the driver’s seat. If we define postmodernity in terms of the desert produced by the forces and services of personalization, we are all active agents of the desert as “personalization is a symbolic operation defined by the processes of desocialization and desertification” (Baudrillard 1988; p.8). Postmodern Hong Kong is, perhaps, a desert. Baudrillard used the desert as a metaphorical wash in order to desertify America, to empty it without recognizing the associative strength wither of the concept itself or of the existing conditions themselves. America is a kind of

hyperspace or more spatial than space, a cyberspace. In other words, a maze in which postmodernists are always losing their way. The real is achieved by means of the perfect fake. If icons were completely indifferent about their objects, one would then have a straight gate to the hyperreal. This is precisely postmodern America and Hong Kong, a gateway to the hyperreal.

Baudrillard has successfully crossed the limits of both Barthes and Saussure for breaking the frame of signifier. Once the signifier and signified have been crushed and the bar disappeared, the signifying chain will then be made open to asignifying fluxes. As Baudrillard describe it as a “passage to a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor of truth, the age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials – worse; by their artificial resurrection in system of signs, a more ductile material than meaning, in that it lends itself to all system of equivalence” (Baudrillard 1983; p. 4). Let’s see how it works in Hong Kong’s advertising industry.

2.5: Desert Screen⁴ – Hong Kong advertisement in the age of hypersignification

Advertisement is one of the most important forms of social communication in the development of a postmodern world. Advertising industry combines skills from all

⁴ The phrase “desert screen” is borrowed from Virilio’s book *Desert Screen* which talk about the War in the Gulf.

walks of life to create images that reflect the society. Therefore, one can always tell the people of the city by the commercials they watch. The logic is simple: when you sell the product to the designed customers, you have to know them first. However, advertisement on this context is not only treated as a kind of marketing activities but as a practice conveying communication not simply for the commodity, but also outlying the model of communication in the postmodern era – the one stated by Baudrillard: simulation.

By looking at the development of advertising industry in Hong Kong, one can review the whole picture of the social development. As I have discussed so far, the situation of Hong Kong is very much like that in America within the Baudrillardian model, the clash of the first and the third stage of simulation brings a rupture on individuals and produces a kind of MTV effects on individuals – rapid movement of signs that makes people dizzy; the subject is lost and they are left behind in an endless quest of their own meaning, like a modern Odyssey – ground for time-space perception: all these could be reflected in Hong Kong's advertising industry. No doubt in Hong Kong commercials, the subject (that is, the product itself) is either absent or pushed to the edge of the screen.

Throughout more than 150 years of colonial history, Hong Kong has developed a theory especially for its own – unique and typical, embracing both western and

Chinese values in order to form the codes of a postmodern metropolitan city as Hong Kong. Those who are born after the year 1949 (the year of Cultural Revolution) are regarded as the first generation of the locally born and bred. Their up-growing process later becomes the solid foundation of the establishment of local values – like codes received from the local TV or movies, ads, fashion etc.. This marks the birth of the Hong Kong local culture.

The following are three case studies of TV ads. All of them have been awarded “The Best 10 Hong Kong TV advertisements” from the year 1999 to 2001. This kind of award, to a certain extent, shows the consumers’ preference nowadays.

Case study 1: *Sunday*

Perhaps the whole series of *Sunday* TV advertisement can illustrate this subtle rupture found in the society of Hong Kong before us. The *Sunday* concept is rich in cultural meaning even though it is considered almost “having gone mad” – a Chinese saying “走火入魔”, which means having gone crazy, evil, irrational, or in short, against social norms⁵. But such irrationality is precisely the essence of the postmodern crowd – having been ‘stuck’ in the world of simulation, the hyperreal logic which drives people towards the ecstatic state; the desert screen which ‘engulfs’

⁵ Such an evil is almost equivalent to what Baudrillard meant in *The Transparency of Evil* – the key weapon used by Objects in its revenge against the Subject.

all depth, all meaning. The effect of time-space displacement traps people in an endless search for home (by home I do not only mean the resting place but also the missing subject, the meaning and the identity). In short, we are all lunatic. All the above elements are the source of the *Sunday* advertising scheme.

What makes Sunday so special is its particularity of local discourse. Some advertisements are global in nature, that is, all people, regardless of sex and nationality, can understand, like the Nike or Addidas campaign, but some are meaningful only in a certain discourse like Sunday campaign. It draws on local values, and only with those who share the same codes are able to decipher. Sunday campaign emphasizes creativity and their advertisement are full of creative elements, yet all elements are put together in a chaotic order, at least, not according to our familiarity. It does not have any particular theme, not even a subject (as the product is hidden behind the screen).

The naming the *Sunday* mobile service is not by coincidence. Why not Monday or Saturday, but Sunday? First of all, Sunday signifies something against routine. It is exactly the opposite of weekdays. Weekdays are usually pre-scheduled but Sunday is left opened. Its slogan – “Feels like Sunday” invites audience to interpret in their own ways. The interpretations of TV ads are traditionally deviated from the advertisers but now TV ads allows the audience to interact with them; this is part

of fun of TV advertising. Advertisers do not provide any guideline or clues but just put the emphasis on “feeling in your own ways”. The word “feel” is not pre-defined but abstract in nature, it is multi-faced. In short, it operates against the logic that something is something. There is no definite “path’ to frame one’s feeling, or to categorizes it as good or bad,,positive or negative – it is an either / or as well as neither / nor concept. One can feel good, feel bad; feel happy, feel nervous etc – you can even feel the nth degree. Hence the name *Sunday* is, in fact, a ‘floating signifier’ and allows room for audience to imagine and interpret for themselves.

When one thinks of the *Sunday* advertising scheme, what comes in mind at the first moment is usually its creativity. By creativity, I mean breaking the convention. True, so far, the *Sunday* advertisement has aroused many noises from the society precisely because it does not follow the traditional rule of the game. Basically advertisement is regarded as a window displaying “happiness” and “a blessed life’; for instance, both McDonald and Coca Cola like to employ child actors not only because they are their target customers, but also they convey a sense of happiness when consuming that products. When TV viewers are constantly exposed to this kind of narration, they will become acclimatized and will gradually search for a counter-strategy against the routine reading rules for TV ads. Therefore, *Sunday* “redefines” this kind of narration here. *Sunday*’s logic is precisely the other way

round – it is horrifying, non-sense and exaggerated. *Sunday* deliberately reverses the code in the hope of introducing some freshness to the audience, of attacking their “immune system” so that the audience is once again, moved by the signifiers on the screen. Like the effect of terrorism discussed in 1.1, this kind of shock can be seen as a test to the limits of the society, “of the institution of power and the ways in which such institutions are located conceptually” (Gane 2000; p.123) as terrorist activities are almost “neutralized” with the popularity of the screen and the power of simulation. A series of shock type executions is employed to draw people’s attention to the message presented on the screen. *Sunday* promotes its products from a reverse angle as in the chapter on “Noodle”.

Scene 1: In this commercial, the man finds an eyeball in his bowl of noodles.

MVO: Freebie comes with a bowl of noodles: *Sunday*’s stored value card gives away a full set of added value service.

Scene 2: A taxi driver driving late at night encountered a ghost

Another “masterpiece” presented in the *Sunday* advertising campaign is its chapter on “*Bruce Lee*”. The subject completely disappears, the whole ad is an ultrasound of a baby inside the mother’s womb.

Scene 3: The feeling when you use the *Sunday* network is such that even this baby gets all excited by kicking like Bruce Lee.

Claim: Use *Sunday* and press *88 for the hottest guide on dining, movies and entertainment and you feelings will be like this baby's.

Again, this chapter draws the audience's attention on "feeling like Bruce Lee" but what does the advertiser mean by "feeling like Bruce Lee", no answer is provided. *Sunday* wants the audience to look for the answer himself, hence the audience is like the postmodern Odysseus – the viewing experience is like a quest for your own particular meaning.

Sunday does not stop at testing the limits of the audience's toleration to shock, it goes on to play with the meaning of the context. One result of the desertification is that it removes all depths, signifier dispersed (please refer to 2.4 for all consequences and reasons). The chapter on "the Misunderstanding – Roaming" plays with the phonetic articulation of the Cantonese translation of the word "roaming" (in Cantonese 「漫遊」). The articulation of the word "roaming" in Cantonese means "swimming slowly" in its literal sense. So this commercial features a group of retirees (hence, swimming slow) wearing swimming trunks made of different national flags to bring out their launching of "roaming mobile service".

Scene 3: A group of retirees as representative from different countries are swimming slowly.

Demonstration: UK roaming

Demonstration: China roaming

Demonstration: Canada roaming

Featuring *Sunday* has already signed up roaming agreement with 60 worldwide network operators.

And the most recent one: a male actor is drilling whatever things he sees so that mutated bodies are everywhere and a head is “hanging” on a neck etc. Even though the ad already includes a warning that every actor (excluding the male protagonist) in this ad is faked, this chapter still receives many complaints from the audience. Again, *Sunday* has successfully challenged the tolerance of the viewing public.

Similar to the “Roaming” chapter, this ad once again challenges the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified. Advertisers deliberately play with the linguistic pun by distorting the relationship between the “denotative signified” and the “connotative signifier” (according to Barthes’ model of signification, the two are supposed to be the same). So here comes the inspiration of this advertisement:

1. (English) Roaming = (Chinese) 漫遊 (literal meaning)

(Chinese) 漫遊 = (Chinese) swim slowly (same articulation)

2. (English) Drill = (Chinese) 鑽 (literal meaning)

(Chinese) 轉 = (Chinese) change (same articulation)

What goes wrong here is the way of proceeding from denotative signified to connotative signifier. Barthes model does not account for any misunderstanding aroused when we proceed from denotation to connotation. The *Sunday* advertisement displaces such an arbitrary relationship that its meaning is not given any depth but it only remains in its literal sense. This can only be done by depriving the linguistic sign (denotative signifier) of its meaning and articulation so that it can be free to dwell in any context (connotative signified) in order to avoid any prediction of the outcome. Thus, the linguistic sign (denotative signifier) remains in its “floating” status and successfully escapes from the frame of signification. Owing to the effect of desertification, signs in postmodern era are merely “empty” and “literal”. *Sunday* makes use of the emptiness of signs to mock at the arbitrary relationship in the tradition model of semiology. Linguistic signs now display their many-faced hypervisibility but none of them alone makes any sense. The bar between signifier and signified has been removed with the power of simulation, and signs keep on reduplicating themselves, eventually leading to an obscene status of signification, so every possible meaning is made immediately available; hence what we witness will be a displacement within the signification process in the *Sunday* advertising campaign.

Another *Sunday* “masterpiece” would be “newsification” of advertisement (廣告新聞化). In its chapter on “Weather Report”, *Sunday* deliberately employs the form of a weather report in its advertising campaign. Freddie, the famous Hong Kong cartoon Weatherman conveys the message that when you use *Sunday*, every day is a fine day. As the “enemy” of TV advertisement is always the remote control – the audience has never found advertisement interesting because of their non-informative nature – therefore, in order to keep the audience watching, using the content of a weather report can draw the audience’s attention, at least for several seconds. However, such practice brings us back to Baudrillard’s idea of obscenity – information implodes, even contents implodes as well – everything turns out to be pure scenarios, be it advertisements, news, opinion polls etc. based on the only criterion that signs must be made credible – actual events as televisual and televisual as actual events. Thus, in line of this, news is ad and ad is news. No doubt Baudrillard declares that McLuhan’s dictum “medium is the message” is no longer valid because we have already reached the end of any medium and marked the beginning of obscenity and the implosion of meaning. What is left behind in the implosion of meaning is only the superficial, the literal, exactly the thing we can see in the whole series of *Sunday* advertisements – literal as the meaningful.

Case Study 2: KMB (Kowloon Motor Bus): local discourse

If *Sunday*'s irrationality is seen as displaying the subtle rupture in our society, by all means the KMB advertising campaign illustrate what is meant by "desert screen" and its implication of the Hong Kong society. Unlike the "craziness" of *Sunday*, KMB put the emphasis on our local values. Its entire advertising campaign attempts to establish a home base, a historic and cultural background for all Hong Kong people.

Scene 1: "I love Nature"

The ad opens with a wide angle shot, featuring a plain with many creatures crawling. When the lens zooms in, it is the buses that are metamorphosed into animals and more and more are metamorphosing and roaming on a plain

Super: We owe the world a lot. 4,199 environmental friendly buses are being incubated.

The plain in this ad is our historical and cultural landscapes – remorseless and uncultivated – where it keeps on breeding our idea of home (represented by buses). However, once such an idea is released, it slips away without leaving any trace. Precisely because it is taking place in a desert, any traces can be eliminated easily – another perfect crime because no clue is left behind as evidence: everything will then

be washed completely from our mind. The signifiers (represented by those buses in this ad) keeps on reduplicating themselves and at the same time are arrayed in a scattered, dispersed position, which means that the idea of home is but a mere representation in the hyperreality. The formula “more X than X” has already put us in an ecstatic state; we are in a position of no return but only keep going, keep on producing the new while at the same time obliterate the old. As discussed in both chapter 1 and 2.4, speed marks “the triumphs of effects over causes, the triumphs of instantaneity over time as depth, the triumph of the surface and pure objectivity over the profundity of desire. In short, speed creates a space of initiation, which may be lethal; its only rule is to leave no trace behind. Triumph of forgetting over memory, an uncultivated, amnesic intoxication” (Baudrillard 1988; p. 6-7). Our memory is gone as speed wipes away everything in order to rebuild the idea of home. The ads put up in the KMB advertising campaign will be on our everyday experiences, drawing the audience’s attention to local issues.

KMB ads used a lot of scenes from our everyday life so as to bring out the idea that KMB is with us. This was captured in two series featuring two points of view:

1. From Passenger

It is often said that airports, railway stations and ferry piers are full of drama. You see the sorrow of departure and the joy of reunion. Well, what happens at a bus

station? One passenger said: “For many years, I have seen the same people at the same time on the same station. Even though I don’t know them personally, I don’t feel that they are strangers either. Every day we go about our routine and something has brought us together.” Throughout his voiceover, we see many familiar Hong Kong scenarios – a cleaner by the bus, a young student alighting, loving couples by the stands and finally the familiar KMB logo as a bus leaves the terminal.

2. From Bus conductor

Bus conductor: “I’ve been driving this route for 8 years and every day I see many new as well as familiar faces. These new faces very soon become familiar ones.” We see a lady passenger with a baby alighting the bus. Through the rear window the bus conductor looks admiringly as he continues: “Often I see men and women turn to couples and students with school bags become adults.” KMB has brought them together. These two commercials strengthen the image and bring out the close relationship between the KMB and its passengers as they grow together.

A very recent one (“Everywhere”), featuring different scenes from our everyday life and the questions put forward: What is the common element in this commercial? Of course, the answer is KMB. It is subliminal advertising where a bus appears

subtly throughout the commercial. The message that “the bus company is very much part of our daily life” is conveyed by linking all these connotative signifiers (scenes) together. Traveling in Hong Kong is like travelling in hyperreality – the array of images produces a kind of invisibility (obscenity) and transparency (emptiness) – everything is to be discovered but everything is to be obliterated simultaneously (again, leaving no trace behind). Being inside a desert like metropolis⁶ (Hong Kong) will result in disorientation – scenes captured outside the window will erase the natural picturesque quality. Images turn out to be flat and banal, carrying no meaning – this is what Baudrillard meant by the “desert-like banality of a metropolis” (*America*, p. 9); places and our activities, even our experiences are “seen televisually as scenery, as scenarios” (Ibid). Again, events and televisual views are two but one thing – we may even wonder whether the world itself isn’t just another advertising copy in any other world. In a hyperreal society (like that of Hong Kong), absence of difference, subject are constantly being seduced, and with the power of screen and networks helping to eliminate or even remove our ground for time and space perception, there is no ground for meaning to root into (hence superficial), so what we see on TV turns out to be our ground for real experience. One can see the traces of

⁶ According to Baudrillard, the followings can be regarded as the qualities of a “desert-like metropolis” which is also applicable to Hong Kong:
“Sideration. Star-blasted, horizontally by car, attitudinally by the plane, electronically by television, geologically by deserts, stereolithically by the megalopoloi, transpolitically by the power game” (*America*, p. 27)

TV and the signifiers of TV ads everywhere: in the street, across the corridor; precisely because our living and our experiences are all made televisual. This series of KMB advertising campaign is actually the evidence of the accusation that “the screen is the desert” where signifiers are overexposed; meaning (or subject) is only a mirage. Most importantly, it points out to us that Hong Kong, like America, is perhaps, a fictional city in the sense that it has no depth and no root. Thus, ads of these kinds arouse our awareness to our collective memory – an idea that we were locally born and brought up together, – and that we are all Hongkongese.

The use of colloquial language may be a starting point. Such a vernacularization made language the second order signifier, the one analyzed by Barthes in *Mythologies* and said to be functioning on the level of cultural connotation. As discussed earlier in the sections of Barthes analysis, vernacular language, (particular the mixture of English and Cantonese found in Hong Kong) is a key connotative signifier to connote cultural differences, even though, in recent times, such a connotative signifiers is reversed to such an extent that it is no longer familiar to us as in the Carlsburg commercial.

The Vitasoy advertising campaign used the technique of didactic narrative like the one found in Educational TV (one source of our collective memory). The entire campaign puts the emphasis on “correctness”. This first one features two teenagers

playing basketball while one comments that the other is playing lousily. Then the commercial freezes and a voice-over comes in to explain the proper description instead of the word “lousily” (in Cantonese 「削」). The second one features two schoolgirls who are gossiping about their hairstyle while a boy comes by and interrupts them. Then again, the commercial freezes and a voice-over comes in to explain why it is impolite for any interruption. Similar to the first one, the second one plays on the meaning of the action “of interrupting” (in Cantonese 「搭訕」). The third one features two young men coming out from the cinema and one of them seems to have been moved by the movie as apparently there is a tear in his eyes. The commercial once again freezes here and a voice-over comes in to explain why crying takes place and why it is good for people. Actually the above TV ads go through some of the Cantonese slangs widely used by the majority of Hong Kong people. Instead of telling the audience it is good to drink Vitasoy, the ad uses the teaching method to bring out the message – a kind of positive value for educational purposes.

These series of TV ads by Vitasoy can be considered a kind of mockery to traditional values. The whole ads are presented in a form of melodrama to mock at the seriousness of “grand narrative” represented by the “educational TV”. The unbearable seriousness of grand narrative is now succeeded by a less serious, less stable, less solid kind of “playful” attitude. Advertisement in the past is regarded as

the “official spokesman” of consumption, but now it “plays” with its official status. In the postmodern era where subject is absent and differences disappear, things appear but are immediately succeeded based on the formula more X than X. People have a certain nostalgic feeling for the past, especially because of the ubiquitous power of simulation that trivializes everything; but precisely what trivial things we see in these ads (like interruption in a conversation, crying after watching a touching movie and laughing at each other) can be the “subject” of the ads (I put the word in quotation because it is just a simulacrum). Things are becoming more and more ordinary, even not worth mentioning. Perhaps it is because grand narrative, which appeared in the past, has been fossilized for such a long time that people want to ‘rejuvenate’ through their nostalgia. Unfortunately, the outcome is merely a pure simulacrum. As mentioned earlier, simulation has put us on a journey of no return. The only return, perhaps, is in terms of nostalgia. This can explain why the Vitasoy ad employs such a “nostalgic” technique (in terms of their set and props, costumes, lighting etc etc) in making these series, precisely to “recall” this kind of nostalgia for the past.

Advertising in recent time seems to employ a strategy of minimalism. Images are reduced to a minimal – only the background color and a number. There is a lot of unoccupied space in the frame. The white space in TV ads serves to arouse imagination. It will intrigue the audience and cause them to continue to consume the

ads. If you force the viewers to interpret the ads, they will simply turn the TV off. It is always better to “pull” than “push” them. With the audience’s long history of viewing, they have established an immune system. The audiences have developed a set of code, and so advertisers cannot do what they like anymore but have to include the role of the audiences in their production. Thus there is a need to come up with different ways to tickle the audiences’ “soft spot”. If the viewers are familiar with a certain genre, advertisers should break out of the conventional advertising method and create something that is unique. Alternative advertising is a new communication tool that will eventually be accepted and become the norm.

Advertising industry in Hong Kong is superfluous. It is just what has stated in ads – “The world is full of information, ready to be delivered to you in every second”. The non-stop, endless, delivery of information will gradually move towards the state, as predicted by Baudrillard, that is full of signification and empty meanings, in short, the desert. The speed (especially through electronic transmission) cancels out the ground that has no depth, just pure superficiality. This is the same for signifiers when our society is crowded with signs; it is growing to be difficult for us to differentiate one sign from another. Throughout our long history of being “passive viewers”, media consumers eventually find a way to position themselves in front of the screen. They use counter –strategy against all the artifacts used by advertisers;

thus advertisement nowadays cannot just linearly present the product by long narration but, instead, advertisers make use of signs in their pure form, let them float on the surface only so that signifiers are made open, without a pre-determined path being fixed in the signification system. Hence, what we witness nowadays are fractured, chaotic, non-sense, ridiculous (as the majority may think at the very first glance) advertisements. Ads nowadays increasingly rely on viewers' participation in media production to establish their own unique (even though it is, after all, a simulated one) meaning.

2.6: Consuming Hong Kong

In the modernist point of view, consumption is a practice to signal social difference and class categorization. But in the postmodern world, as Jean Baudrillard has pointed out, the rise of mass media resulted in chaotic order of signs, the traditional approach of sign study (that is, semiology) failed to account for the problem of simulacra in postmodern era. Now, information from the media becomes dispersed, discontinuous signifiers: pastiche (especially in architecture and advertising industry). Signs keep on reproducing themselves and all these mark the singularity of a postmodern consumer society.

To all postmodern consumers, the consumption of sign value has exhausted or

replaced the traditional use value. According to Baudrillard, every object must be, first of all, commodified to be signs in order to be consumed and consumption is based on the logic of not acquiring the use value but operating under the “social function of exchange, communication and distribution of values with a corpus of signs” (Poster 1988; p. 46).

To some postmodern critics, consumption does not mean to “choose” or to “use” but to gain pleasure (even though it is, again, simulated) through the act of purchasing as well as fulfilling desires which can never be fulfilled in real time experience (please refer to 1.2 for the example of experience projected on screen being more vivid than actual experience). This is a typical example of postmodern carnival experience. As opposed to Marxist critique of ideology (that is, the process of interpellation about which subject is recruited to its pre-determined position), postmodern critics think that, through the consumption of these signifiers, there comes a “carnavalesque situation in which dominant norms are transgressed and a fundamentally different situation erupts.” (Kellner 1989; p. 93) It is all about the logic of “ ‘turnabout’ and ‘the inside out’ parodying modernity rule of the game codes, conventions and hierarchies and pointing to their conventionality, arbitrariness and frequent ludicrousness” (Ibid). Consumers are emancipated from the routine and convention; they can even appropriate meaning from all these “free-floating

signifiers” presented on ads and turn the message from one-dimensional interpretation to a polysemic open text. In other words, consumers are not moved by the secret spell of TV ads but are actively involved in polysemic reading experience in order to subvert the traditional sense of advertising industry. No doubt what one witnesses are...

2.6.1: Feature of Postmodern Consumption

1. Promiscuous

Postmodern consumers no longer have any loyalty to brand name, in fact, what they now exercise is “mix & match” – Texaco with sneakers; jeans as evening gown etc. People like to mix all brands together, be they famous or not, according to their own judgement. In the past, people followed the array of signifiers in ads to consume in order to signify their difference. Now, consumers basically consume according to their own tastes. This can be seen as a kind of “tactic” – according to de Certeau – to resist the meaning imposed on them.

2. Fragmented

Fragment implies that there is no longer a central point – a point of interpretation. Events are made “pure” – for instance, the MTV style of ads – non-sense so that they

are impossible to decode as Baudrillard comments: “phenomena appear we must grasp them as they appear, hardly giving them time to being to make sense then steer them immediately into the director of disappearance” (Gane 1993; p. 179). Because everything is made to appear in its “pure” status, which is not meant for any interpretation, it is in that sense, escapes from any means of signification.

3. Instantaneous

“Disposability” (for instance, contact lens) and immediate availability (for instance, instant coffee) are emphasized. Consumers nowadays suffer from time-space disorientation. In a world where time is gone forever with no return, immediacy is, perhaps, the only indicator of time especially with the absence of traces of history and aesthetic values (because of desertification), and so what people want is something for immediate possession; consumers cannot even wait for a second. Imagine people lining up early in the morning just to get the latest release of tickets, the latest model of mobile phone: they just want to grasp them as long as these signifiers still appear (because they will be immediately obliterated by the new). The postmodern consumer society is actually a society for first-hand information – the hottest is the best. In a society where people constantly experience a displacement of time, to all postmodern consumers, hottest means immediate, the moment before the desert

screen has obliterated signifiers. This maybe the reason why consumers are willing to pay such a “high price” (for instance, in an auction, queuing up early in the morning etc.) to get back their “lost time” (that is, their experience of time through consuming these commoditified signifiers as their indicator of time).

2.6.2: Consumption within a “Cultural Desert”

The postmodern world is a world without subject, or to be more precise: the distinction between subject/object dichotomies has disappeared. The objective world becomes a simulacrum. The world created by the media imitates the objective world, which, in return, exhausts all the energy of the objective world and is finally dissolved by the formula “more X than X”. The consumption of signs makes consumers lose the ground of space and time (hence, desertified). Mass and media are inter-connected and form a new social order.

In a situation like this, what has been projected in advertising industry is thus more real than the one found “in reality”. Once we have stepped into the postmodern consumer world, reality and signs no longer make any difference but form the ‘hyperreality’. To all of us, reality is but a façade formed by the display of signs. As there is no “objective reality” lying outside the linguistic system (that is, *la langue*), there is no reality formed that is not based on linguistic signs. Reality is

but a product created or constructed through the process of signification. As the chain between signifier and signified has now been broken, what we perceive is a fragmented, viral, destabilized and discontinuous order. By all means people always mixed things up with hallucinated and actual experience like what happens in science fiction. Since there is no “origin” of reality, there is no way to prove what is real and what is not. Postmodern advertisements emphasize this instability, the play and display of signs, reduplication and displacement, a simulated experience, using the “surface” as a means to subvert the “depth” in order to hide (through endless deferment) the latter behind the signifiers. Once again, this echoes with our discussion of desert and this may be one of the reasons why Hong Kong is named “Cultural Desert”.

Hong Kong is a place that drifts in a world without anchor and without destination. Walking around the urban area in Hong Kong is like travelling in hyperreality; everywhere there is screen and network, everywhere is filled with information, signs and codes that make you dizzy. In a place like this, the consumption pattern derived is also fragmented, singular, and promiscuous.

Consumption is more than an activity that is simply imposed by the advertising industry or commercial interest upon consumers, it is an active process involving the symbolic construction of a sense of both collective and individual identity. As

Baudrillard argued, consumers consume neither for their Use Value nor Exchange Value but they create a sense of who they are through what they consume.

Consumers cannot really fulfill their desires through the act of consumption but instead, it is just the beginning of another consumption process.

This suggests that there are no limits to consumption. If it was that which it is naively taken to be, an absorption, a devouring, then we should achieve satisfaction. But we know that this is not the case: we want to consume more and more. This compulsion to consume is not the consequence of some psychological determinant etc., nor is it simply the power of emulation. If consumption appears to be irrepressible, this is because it is a total idealist practice which has no longer anything to do (beyond a certain point) with the satisfaction of needs, nor with the reality principle...hence, the desire to 'moderate' consumption, or to establish a normalizing network of needs, is naïve and absurd moralism."

(Poster 1988; p. 24-5)

The logic is simple: as consumption is a matter of cultural signs and the relation between signs, the very act of our consumption is for the sake of signaling a difference, based on the principle of difference: our aim will be endlessly deferred, hence our desires can never be satisfied and we are all doomed to be trapped in an endless consuming process.

In the past, that is, in the modern period where the semiological chain between signs and referent was still valid, people try to be the one they want to be by consuming a particular kind of product according to the signifiers presented on ads. But in the age of hyperreality where signs that appear in ads become self-referential and ground zero, the autonomy of signs has eventually marked its total separation from the "real".

What matters now is not the Use Value nor needs as once Marxist used to criticize bourgeois ideology. As Baudrillard argued that every consumption is a consumption of symbolic signs, these signs will not just present the pre-existing meaning. Meaning, on the other hand, is generated within the signification system, which engages the attention of a consumer. Therefore, instead of considering the process of consumption as a result of satisfying physical needs, it should be conceptualized as a process in which consumers actively engage in trying to create and maintain a sense of identity through the display of what they have bought.

Consumer goods in postmodern society are sold as signs – our daily life, our identity, our cultures are all commodified as different sign values presented by the advertising industry. It forms its own rules, just as Baudrillard remarks, “the entire strategy of the system [of consumption] lies in this hyperreality of floating values” (Poster 1988; p. 114). That is the reason why I use “Consuming Hong Kong” as the title of this section. By consuming these commodified sign values in advertising, we can retrieve our aesthetic values and our sense of time.

Hong Kong has never been a place of patriotism. The absence of the sense of nation means that Hong Kong people do not have a strong sense of belonging. Psychologically speaking, Hong Kong people always have a sense of insecurity deep inside in their unconscious level. This maybe the reason why Hong Kong people

love to collect things – imagine the long queue waiting outside McDonald recently. The snoopie mania reveals people in lack of a collective memory; they have nothing to share, not to mention the national history. Only through a system of collection can they retrieve their ‘fragmented’ selves bit by bit. The possession of the “full collection” at home symbolizes the reunion of their “fragmented” selves. Hong Kong, like America, does not have a strong sense of cultural depth. The absence of a solid historical background results in a fictional city: the so-called “non-sense” culture (無厘頭文化) is widely practised and rapidly develops especially among individual youngsters who are supposed to be more alert to cultural signs than the elderly. Actually this very singular culture can be seen as a product or the aftermath of the emancipation of signifiers – since every signifier now becomes free-floating, open to a wide range of interpretations, which, in return generate a wide gap for (mis)communication. This is a typical phenomenon found in nowadays Hong Kong, and that is why very often we do not understand what is presented on TV ads, particularly as they just aim for a miscommunication. As advertisements are growing to be more and more further away from the product itself, it is useless to determine the product just based on the signifiers presented by the advertising on screen; an individual interpretation is required in the reading process. Consumers nowadays do not buy what the advertisers present on the screen, but what they think

is presented instead. This is why consumers always keep an eye on “What’s Hot and What’s not”, as a means to test whether their “answer” is correct or not. In that sense, postmodern advertisements are similar to an enigma, like the one set by Sphinx: the moment when someone (Oedipus) successfully spelled out the correct answer, the power of Sphinx disappeared, and she thus met her destiny. Interpreting from another angle, the reason why Baudrillard claims that only death enables us to escape all these “symbolic exchanges” is that death takes away our power and deprives us of our chance to decipher, and hence releases us from the signification process, we will from then on, similar to the fate of signifiers, become “free-floating”, without depth, indifferent and freely drifting in the world of information.

2.7: The inadequacy of Baudrillard

Perhaps Baudrillard goes too extreme in proclaiming “the end of production”, “the end of medium” which contributes to the establishment of “the desert”. Worst still, in his eyes, the masses become the silent majorities owing to the endless proliferation of signs and the popularity of screens and networks. But, in Baudrillard’s study on mass media, there are still some areas that he did not cover and these areas provide some space for the audience to practise their activities.

First of all, Baudrillard does not treat the question of marketing seriously. He

devotes his attention to the study of advertising, which only deals with the question of representation and not the question of circulation of signs, in other words, marketing.

When talking about consumption, we cannot ignore the side of the consumer.

Baudrillard's theories on sign value only provide justification for advertisers to make use of their right to create symbolic meanings beyond use value and exchange value

of a product, in short, the proclamation on the "hegemony of signs", but not how

consumers make use of all those signs. No doubt Baudrillard's ideas are appealing

to advertisers only because all they want is the "silent majorities", and not those

active agents.

Different businesses have their own ways of utilizing all marketing strategies to affect the everyday lives of consumers. Marketing is not merely dominated by simulation, but it is a complex subject derived from production, seduction and circulation. The difference between advertising and marketing is that the former uses the media to let the audience know such a product or service is available while the latter refers to the movement of such a product or service from producer to consumer. In television advertising, signs are compressed and condensed to a 30-second message – nothing is shown and nothing is told after all. It is in this sense that Baudrillard regards this phenomenon as the implosion of meaning, the obscenity. But all these are constructed based on one assumption – the audience will be moved

by these signs and act accordingly. True, the audience may be fascinated by these signs but these signs will not deliver the consumer to the product. The right to buy it or not is still in the hands of the consumer. What I can say is that these signs can only be regarded as indices, which point the audience to the product. However, as discussed in earlier sections (2.3), an index does not have any referent, its only function is to point out the way and nothing else. Therefore, in order to have thorough study of advertising, it is necessary to bring in some other critics especially those who are keen on analyzing consumers' behaviour like Michel de Certeau.

Baudrillard's pessimistic writing on the consumer culture and the commodification of everyday life marks a great contrast with other critics like Michel de Certeau and John Fiske with their emphasis on the productive pleasure of consumption. Baudrillard argues that postmodern culture of consumption gives rise to homogeneous masses of consumers, that is, the silent majorities. But later in the coming chapter, we will see that the consumers are not entirely passive. They have their own way to appropriate all these ad signs in their everyday lives for the pursuit of happiness.

Chapter 3 The Question of Agency: The Inventiveness of our Everyday Practices¹

The chapter aims at exploring the creativity and transformative possibility embedded in our everyday practices through the act of consumption. The sense of everydayness is often depicted as banal, but according to critics like de Certeau, this is not the case. In fact, “life is beautiful” depends on how far you get yourself involved in the making of it. Through our everyday practices, we can always resist or even subvert all sorts of “meanings” and “presuppositions” imposed on us: the miniature of everyday life is to be brought into view by ways of its underpinning logic.

In the past, the masses were regarded as “silent majorities” by Baudrillard. They witness the implosion of meaning as the society is becoming more and more totalitarian in the ways it controls its citizens by screen and networks – consumers receive information without interpreting it – only pure event that is not meant for any decipher to dismantle the entire signification system. It is in this sense that the postmodern scene is depicted to be a spiral taken over by pure simulacrum. However, nowadays, if taken from a more optimistic point of view, silence can be regarded one of their major and most powerful weapons instead.

To “invent” one’s life does not mean a total creation but to take the initiative

¹ This is one of the many translations of de Certeau’s book title

in responding, as suggested by the French sociologist, Michel de Certeau, who believes that even if consumers consume the cultural products, they are still at the same time demonstrating their “creativity”, in other words, their “productive power” as he states at the very beginning

“Many, often remarkable, works have sought to study the representation of a society, on the one hand, and its modes of behaviour on the other. Building on our knowledge of these social phenomena, it seems both possible and necessary to determine the *use* to which they put by groups or individuals. For example, the analysis of the images broadcast by television (representation) and of the time spent watching television (behaviour) should be complemented by a study of what the cultural consumer “makes” or “does” during this time and with these images.”

(de Certeau 1984; p. xii)

In other words, de Certeau proposes an alternative conceptualization of consumption, that is, when we analyze the influence of TV images, we need, at the same time, to take into consideration when and how a consumer “makes use of these images broadcast”. In view of this, what should be focused on is the role of those “cultural consumers” especially in the ways they appropriate these “cultural images” they consume. To what degree are consumers able to maintain their own autonomy, or resist the hegemonic control of all kinds of social institutions? De Certeau is definitely against the traditional view of a “passive consumer”, as analyzed by Adorno. The passive and obedient majorities (in that sense, similar to the silence majorities presented by Baudrillard) become a special and unique community as in de Certeau, the one marked by a distant feature of their marginality, the one who occupies the

periphery resisting the “culture”. If Foucault was right in pointing out the fact that power institution is inscribed in all aspects of our life, then what we should be concerned about is how consumers will react when confronted with all these power institutions. The antagonism between cultural producers and consumers is not the chief focus but de Certeau just wanted to open up some spaces for discussion based on our everyday practices, be it “reading, talking, walking, dwelling, cooking, etc.” (de Certeau 1984, p. xvii). However, the only condition is that these practices must bear the quality of “tacticity”, that is

“the place of a tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances.”

(de Certeau 1984: p. xix)

In short, consumers need to “read” these cultural signifiers and in the process of reading, they are at the same time deconstructing the “author space” and reconstructing (even though it is a hidden production) their own space. By all means, every practices or means for consumer to demonstrate their own agency cannot escape from the whole “state apparatus”; what consumers do is only to “counter-react” as mentioned by de Certeau.

As Lefebvre suggested, everyday life is “a site of interaction between the everyday and the modern [where] two connected, correlated phenomena that are

neither absolute nor entities: everyday life and modernity, the one crowning and concealing the other, revealing it and veiling it" (Lefebvre 1971: 24). Consumption is an event arising from the intersection of the everyday and the modern, even the postmodern that happened across the "wandering lines" marked by consumers traversing the grids of modernism (de Certeau 1984: xviii).

De Certeau believes that oppression breeds insurrection – the chance for escape. He considers that everyday practice is possible and necessary to include the determined component: the use of groups or individuals. He proposed the idea to "invent" our everyday practices that we can be active agents in the postmodern consumer society – we actually "live through" our everyday life. Our first everyday practice, as suggested by de Certeau, is to analyze the manipulation of the consumption by users, to understand all edifices and ruses behind so that we can develop a position in favour to our own interest.

The term "agency", in short, can be regarded as how people take part as a mediated agency in history and social approaches. In fact, agency is the result after a long viewing history of being the "passive audience as well as consumers". This concept refers "not to intended, discrete acts, but to the flow of conduct perpetrated by individuals, taking place under conditions (acknowledged or unacknowledged by them) and having unintended consequences – including, of course, the reproduction of

structured social relations” (Tudor, 102). In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau aims to use everyday practices to resist against all sorts of hegemonic institutions imposed on consumers. Everyday, to de Certeau, is “to dispose of the multitude of apparatuses that one way or another are today endeavouring to articulate the everyday as a whole” (Buchanan 2000: 49). It is for this reason that we have to “ransack” our everyday practices to see if there is anything, be it a very minor one, that we can do to establish our own sovereignty. Everyday is there; it is not something invisible, but only we fail to recognize it or are blind to see it. The logic of practices de Certeau proposed is a language experiment in the form of a description of the everyday as he states that “part of a continuing investigation of the ways in which users – commonly assumed to be passive and guided by established rules – operate” (de Certeau, 1984: xi) with an aim not “so much to discuss this elusive yet fundamental subject as to make such a discussion possible; that is, by means of inquiries and hypotheses, to indicate pathways for the future” (de Certeau, 1984: xi). What we need to understand is the generation of a new type of language and its brand new grammar rules. Only by operating our everyday practices, be it walking, reading or cooking, can we make life more meaningful.

What Michel de Certeau emphasizes are the particular ways of social practice or “everyday practice”. Ways of operating are needed be explicated in the process of

“consumption”, a hidden production by its users. What he focused on is the relation between consumers and the mechanism of production where he derived two practices: tactics and strategy. By strategy, de Certeau refers to “the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power can be isolated from an ‘environment’ [assuming that] a place that can be circumscribed as proper and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it” (de Certeau 1984; p. xix). By tactics, he means “a calculus which cannot count on a ‘proper’ (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality” (Ibid). de Certeau explains in the latter chapter that

“a tactic is a calculated action, determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy. The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power...Tactics are procedures that gain validity in relation to the pertinence they lend to time – to the circumstances which the precise instant of an intervention transforms into a favourable situation, to the rapidity of the movements that change the organization of a space, to the relations among successive moments in an action, to the possible intersections of durations and heterogeneous rhythms, etc.”

(de Certeau 1984; p. 36-8)

What de Certeau emphasizes is that when facing these managerial strategic controls, for instance, in the advertising industry; consumer can still derive a tactical way to resist in order to retain its own integrity. In line of this, consumption becomes the art of making, demonstrating the power to combine (mix and match) and utilize these

cultural signifiers.

Strategy is a technique of place whereas tactics is a technique of space. The former is something physical whereas the latter intangible, something beyond our grasp. The essential difference between the two is the way they relate to the variables that everyday life entails. Strategy aims at taking full control of all variables affecting us by creating some “guidelines”, a means to “predict” consumers’ behaviour. On the other hand, tactics is constantly the “swim of things” which cannot be shaped nor framed. Tactics operates primarily on the plane of belief. It refers to the set of practices that strategy has not been able to domesticate. It is not in itself subversive, but it breeds a certain kind of resistance, suggesting that there is still an area which is not properly tamed. In other words, wherever comes the domain of strategy, there are always some anti forces going on to counteract.

With the understanding of the representation of a society and its modes of behaviour, de Certeau proposes that we should exercise those tactical actions to fight for a place of our own. Since signs are everywhere, it is necessary for us to retain our “autonomy”, as de Certeau has already warned us that consumption is “devious, dispersed and insinuates itself everywhere,” (de Certeau 1984; p. 475) with certain impositions of a dominant economic order which “does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products” (de Certeau 1984; p.

475). Further, the practice of consumption is measured by “the difference or similarity between the production of the image and the secondary hidden in the process of its utilization” (Ibid, p. 476), we have to think of ways to “transform within the dominant cultural economy in order to adopt it to our own interest and our own rules” (ibid). The example he gave is the practice of *la perruque*. *La perruque* is a French word meaning workers using scrap materials and factory machines to create objects on their free time for themselves. De Certeau sees it as a way in which users (that is, the workers) are using the tools that oppress them to create new objects (in other words, to create a space on and for their own). Example given later by Fiske will be the tearing or bleaching of one’s jeans. Fiske, following the idea of being the active agency proposed by de Certeau, stressed the oppositional and subversive practice of consumers and argued that consumers did resist meanings and ideologies inscribed within the cultural signifiers presented by advertising. This, alongside with de Certeau’s idea of “collective activity”, opens up new spaces and frees us from the oppressive structures of postmodern society.

De Certeau put cultural representation and individual modes of behaviour together. For instance as discussed earlier, the analysis of image broadcast by television representation and of the time spent watching television should be complemented by a study of what the cultural consumer ‘makes’ or ‘does’ during this

time and with these images” (de Certeau 1984: xii). His goal is not to develop a theoretical apparatus which is capable of articulating the more mundane features of the everyday in their concrete form, what he was interested in was the impersonal, the non-individual that speaks through the individual subject, rather than what he or she thinks or has to say. De Certeau wanted to contrive an analysis of culture from the mute perspectives of the body, the cry and the murmur, (hence, silence can be considered a powerful weapon ever used by the Sirens), none of which needs to be identified with a specific, knowable individual, in order to be apprehended. He aimed at the legitimization of the everyday itself as a resource for the primordial understanding of human behaviour.

De Certeau stressed the creative and empowering possibilities of everyday cultural action. In the act of reading, for instance, de Certeau saw not merely the reproduction of social meanings, already mapped out by a bureaucratic and technological system which had been able to foreclose the possibilities of texts, being used subversively to produce radical social meanings, but also an act of ‘enunciation’ – a positive and energizing social process which readers might use to hew from the materials and structures which confront them and in which they were forced to live, a certain ‘tactical space’ of cultural resistance. Hence the analogy de Certeau chose to use in describing everyday cultural action was the one with which

ordinary people, through their familiar daily routines, confronted the substantial edifice and powers of the economic and political system. The dichotomy existing here between production and consumption was characterized by de Certeau in the following terms:

“In reality a rationalized, expansionist, centralized, spectacular and clamorous production is confronted by an entirely different kind of production, called ‘consumption’ and characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation (the result of circumstances), its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless but quiet activity, in short, by its quasi-invisibility, since it shows itself not in its own products, but in an act of using those imposed it.”

(de Certeau 1984: 31)

de Certeau's remark stresses the dynamic and culturally enabling nature of consumption. Consumption is never a passive or mediated social process of assimilating what is offered by producers, but is always a process through which social meanings are constructed and contested. This fact invites us to foreground the critical areas of textual polysemy, the multi-accentual character of the sign in social discourse, and the ever-shifting historical conditions and forces which underwrite the exact formation of social relations at any given moment.

3.1: Tactics 1 – mutating the established rules

To break the frame becomes the new trend among the young generation. A new generation – “Generation X” – appeared in the late 20th century as the result of the over-abundance of signs. This generation witnesses all pros and cons of high

capitalism – material yet extravagant. Although material desires can be easily fulfilled, alienation as well as disorientation becomes its aftermath. Those who were born in this generation are lost in the ubiquity of signs, namely signs produced from cultural representation. In order to guide them out from the postmodern labyrinth, there is always a need to start from the trivialities of our everyday practices.

Cultural representation produces consumers with the power of mass media. Consumers are dazzled by the ubiquity as well as the proliferation of signs – they are caught up in the endless traffic and exchange of signs – from network and screen – the power of mass media has, in fact, made our society a “recited” one. Hence, in the eyes of both Adorno and Baudrillard, consumers are entirely “passive”. However, what we aim at exploring is not merely meaning, pleasure and subjectivity through the act of consumption, but how people determine their own position in their everyday practices such as consumption.

The postmodern Hong Kong is a “big show society”, our entire living space actually being penetrated by different means of representation. Our scope of vision is limited as interpretations from all angles are provided prior to our reading and understanding. In order to counteract to these types of reception, audiences now are much more tactical in playing this game. They need to turn their viewing experience of ads into a kind of practices, which enable them to resist the panoptic control of TV

screen. The remote control is definitely a mechanism invented after our long history of viewing TV.

A new concept now arises – concept X; X is a variable. It can be any one, open to all sorts of ideas and discussion. Consumption thus becomes a fluid concept, it cannot be shaped, not even by the power of signs as shown in advertising. Consumers now make use of their privileges to practise their own appropriation – to decide their own choices. Advertisements are no longer methods of education but just forms of propaganda – they signify for the sake of signification only. As discussed in the previous chapter, signs that appeared in TV advertisement are all “floating signifiers”. They are meaningless unless someone deciphers them. Hence advertisements nowadays are further and further away from not only the product’s usefulness, but also the product itself. One reason is that they provide enough space for consumers to revolt against the established rules. By rules, I refers to the reading methods of TV signs. As TV viewers have grown too acclimatized to advertising’s routine messages and reading rules, they constantly flip back and forward with the employment of a remote control. These “media-literate consumers” have gradually established a “tactic”, negotiating the meaning of ads as well as defending for themselves throughout their long history of watching TV. Take

the research done by a group of secondary students on mobile phone², consumers complained that some of those TV ads on mobile phone are too abstract and indirect which makes them confused. In the past, ads were simple and easy to follow: advertisers would simply focus on the functional use of the product, highlighting all the features to such an extent that it is quite didactic, simply to teach the consumers what to buy and what not. But now, consumers are more television-literate, they will, first of all, determine the relevancy of the ad and the product before they make any decision. They will even complain there are too much violence or haunted elements in the ads (as in *Sunday: The ghost* & *Sunday: The Drill*). Thus, consumers are not always moved by ads but to a certain extent, they do involved in the making of them. This maybe the reason why the mission of nowadays advertisers changed from didactic to serving – “we do our best for our consumers” (以消費者利益為依歸).

What postmodern advertisers emphasize is the involvement of audience, not only in the act of purchasing but also the viewing experience. “Create your own taste” is their motto and their guide. Advertising signs are not delivered in one-dimension but they strongly require consumers to decipher and to make any responses after viewing especially in times of a recession in advertising industry. Receiving responses from consumers provide a direction to advertisers to follow, therefore, the

² please refer to http://hk.geocities.com/chineseproject123/new_page_41.htm for the result of the survey

making of TV ads is never a one-way action. There are various ways to collect responses: some of the advertisers may keep on testing the limit of the consumers by intensifying their viewing emotion (as in those *Sunday* ads), others may invite the consumers to choose their favourite characters or even the endings of the ads (as in those *1010* ads). This shows that those advertising signs on TV is a result of a on-going process of negotiations between consumers and advertisers in the making of them and hence consumers become active agents in view of this.

3.2 Tactic 2: Silence as weapon

As discussed earlier in the first chapter, silence is actually regarded as the most powerful weapon ever used by the Sirens. The reason for its being powerful is that it breaks the conventions and turns against all the presuppositions imposed on them. Baudrillard considered that “the silent majority is an imaginary referent [because] their representation is no longer possible. The masses are no longer referents because they no longer belong to the order of representation” (Baudrillard 1983; p. 20). He declared that this would be the “end of the social”. The entire process requires a combination of three factors: an explosion of signs, an implosion of signs governed largely by the media, and a simulated explosion that keeps us from recognizing the implosion. One of the main reasons is that the society is imploded

with an over abundance of signs which gradually creates an obscene situation – everything is fully exposed, ready for immediate digestion by the masses. Primarily, we are told what we want and advertisements attempt to persuade us that in fact we are.

To remain silent does not mean a passive escape or a postponement of response but the potential for action. Silence and stillness suggest, to a certain extent, solemnity and authority. Definitely advertisers can read what is going on in consumers' mind if all of them remain silent. What these advertisers do is to keep proliferating many more images in order to “make the silent majorities move”. But the fact of being silent is to digest all kinds of information, be it advertising images or cultural signs, before the “silent majorities” take any actions. Unlike consumers in previous time, they are all accustomed to such a proliferation and thus they derive a “tactical means” to handle. Consumers in nowadays society are not as compulsive as those in the past, but they understand the ruses, the edifice employed in order to give up their own saying in the act of consumption. What they can do is to remain silent while at the same time they are waiting for the right moment to redeem their sovereignty and proclaim their autonomy. It is in this sense that silence becomes their scepter, their weapon.

The white spaces in ads are actually the space for imagination. Such spaces

will intrigue the consumers into continuing to read the ads -- not just to read but also to present a series of claims for their own stylized individuality which pave the way for individuals to establish their own "wish list" to see which products they see fit; in other words, to personalize all these advertising signifiers in favour to their own needs. If readers are forced to read, they will simply be turned off. Thus, it is always better to "pull" than "push" them. Here, consumers can exercise their power of silence. The choice is left to them, they can choose to respond or not, as they are in possession of all the information. They are no longer spectator but actors in the performance, actors that have a high involvement in the performance itself. If agency is defined as the way people take part as a mediated agency in history and social approaches, then, by all means, once again, we are all active agents.

3.3 Tactic 3: re-establishing distance

Distance actually crowns the subject "the authority to speak" and make it outstanding. TV has, indeed, created an environment with which the concept of "far" and "near" correlates. In order to understand the power of TV advertising images, we need to understand, first of all, the nature of its medium. How does the distance created between the image (re)presented and the viewer contribute to the establishment of an illusion, an illusion that persuades us to consume? To decode

such a power of the images (re)presented on the domain of *tele-visual*, we need to overcome the problem of distance. If we get into the picture, we actually see nothing. Baudrillard has called this phenomenon *obscenity* because we are standing too close to it as he writes,

The absolute proximity, the total instantaneity of things, the feelings of no defense, no retreat. It is the end of interior and intimacy, the overexposure and transparency of the world which transverse him without obstacle. He can no longer produce the limits of his own being, can no longer play nor stage himself, can no longer produce himself as mirror. He is now only a pure screen, a switching centre for all the networks of influence.

(Baudrillard 1988; p. 133)

Obscenity turns audiences into entirely passive receivers, that is, a pure screen, as there is no way for them to think nor to resist, not to mention the possibility of escaping. On the other hand, if we get out of the picture, we also cannot see anything because we are standing too far away. If we are in the picture, we cannot get the picture; but if we want to get the picture, we cannot be in the picture. Thus to understand is to distance, to distance is to make a balance between the concept of “far” and that of “near”, and this is where we can construct our own position to criticize, enabling us to understand the world which paves the way for the resistance of passive consumption, and there, once again refers to the question of consumer agency.

Conclusion

The original idea of advertising is, perhaps, to establish a labyrinth, that is, to confuse consumers (so as to divert their attention from their choice) in their act of consumption. One distinct feature of a labyrinth is the difficulty in finding the way out. If TV advertisement is a postmodern labyrinth, the more consumers want to “proceed” (that is, to decipher the signs), the more they end up in vain (as things inside a labyrinth are only for the sake of making the insiders confused). The slogan “You are What You consume” is the “secret spell” of the magic of advertisement as it attracts consumers and traps them inside the labyrinth of signs. However, the “magic spell” of this slogan no longer works in nowadays society as consumers are given an “Adriadne’s thread¹”. Similar to an anchor, the thread enables consumers to stabilize, to tie themselves to a position that is in favour of them. Instead of drifting themselves into disorientation, consumers begin to actively participate in the production of meanings. Advertisements now do not aim at framing their consumers, but on the other hand, they aim at “exhibition”, the signs that appear in TV ads being more and more for the sake of signifying only. This leads to what Baudrillard called “the proliferation of signs”.

Perhaps as Baudrillard described in *America*, the world we’re living in is like the

¹ This refers to the Greek Mythology about Ariadne and Theseus. Adriadne, the daughter of the King of Minos, Crete falls in love with Theseue, son of the King of Athenes. With the help of Adriadne, Theseus got the thread from Adriadne and find the way out after

one reflected from a rear mirror while we are driving onwards – it produces a sense of “invisibility, transparency or transversality in things, simply by emptying them out” (Baudrillard 1988; p. 7). New signifiers keep on appearing and re-appearing, like the scene of the surrounding perceived from the window when one is driving on the highway, while at the same time these scenes are evading their precedents, putting them into complete oblivion. Especially in a place like Hong Kong where there is an absence of a solid cultural or aesthetic foundation, there is a great tendency for different social groups, for example, the middle class and the young generation, to establish their social identity, their image based on their consumption habits. As consumption structures much in our everyday aspects including identities, aspirations and imagination, through the act of consumption, consumers are able to retrieve their status and their existence. They simply and promptly consume all these “floating signifiers” appearing on TV ads when the latter are still available, that is, within their grasp. TV ads, in this sense, are the only means, the only exhibition hall where these “floating signifiers” are given a chance to display in front of their “saviours” (that is, the consumers) as it is only through the act of consuming that these “floating signifiers” (either in physical sense or their visual sense) can be rescued; otherwise, after their “golden moment” is gone, these signifiers will be in a complete abyss,

completely forgotten by the consumers. In short, the very idea of postmodern consumption is to capture all these “significant moments or meanings” implied by these “floating signifiers” before they fade away.

De Certeau, alongside with other cultural critics like Stuart Hall and Bourdieu, revolted against the rather pessimistic accounts of consumption pattern which are subservient to the “dominant ideologies” established by capitalists. In particular, de Certeau put much of his emphasis on the oppositional and resistive aspects embodied in everyday practices, especially in consumption. Similar to the work of the other critics mentioned earlier, they began to identify “spaces” within media texts in order to “evade” or even to “subvert” the dominant or established order.

Postmodern consumption pattern is founded on two essential elements, namely floating signifiers and nomadic consumers’ behaviour. The word “nomadic” actually denotes two meanings: romantic and nomadic respectively. Romantic in the sense that in the process of reading cultural signifiers, they should not be bounded by those “strategies” provided by capitalists. Like the poets in the age of Romanticism who put great emphasis on the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling, readers in postmodern age should also act spontaneously, not according to what has been predetermined but according to their own behaviour. Nomadic, on the other hand, means that during their reading process, consumers – or more precisely – users travel

in between those rifts and spaces in order to look for pleasures. In other words, users make use of their own “romadic” status to freely appropriate and employ meanings or signs in favour of themselves. The technique developed will be “tactics” (as in de Certeau’s own words). Tactics then become the art of the weak and subordinate and are used to undermine, to challenge, to shake or even to subvert the structure of all established orders. In short, consumption becomes the postmodern battlefield where the contest between capitalists and consumers still goes on. However, victory is not always on the side of the powerful but on those who are sensitive to the market and can respond promptly and act swiftly to any change, even a minor one.

Last but not least, never underestimate the wisdom of the consumers and the audience. This is the accumulation of their everyday life as well as everyday “live” experiences. Cultural Studies aims at teaching students how to build up a critical mind. We should not take everything for granted, but to examine its “hidden production” behind. We should study everything, every discourse – in plural, or even, in multi perspectives. It is only through educating the public that they are enabled to resist all hegemonic disciplines.

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